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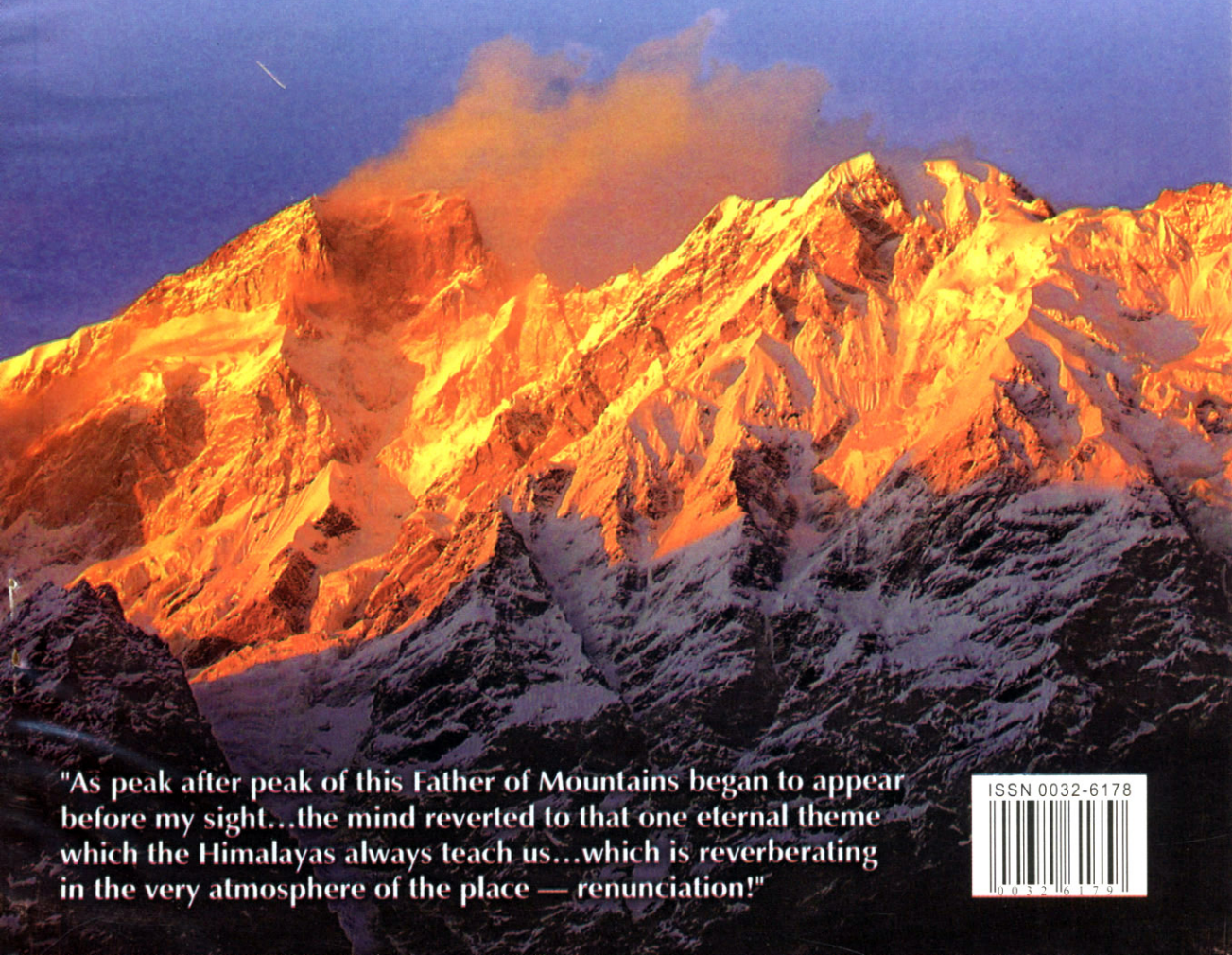


MARCH
2006

PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

A Monthly Journal of the Ramakrishna Order
Started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



"As peak after peak of this Father of Mountains began to appear before my sight...the mind reverted to that one eternal theme which the Himalayas always teach us...which is reverberating in the very atmosphere of the place — renunciation!"

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Editorial Office:
Prabuddha Bharata

Advaita Ashrama

P.O. Mayavati, Via. Lohaghat

Dt. Champawat-262 524

Uttaranchal, India

E-mail: awakened@rediffmail.com

Publication Office:

Advaita Ashrama

5 Dehi Entally Road, Kolkata-700 014

Phs: 91• 33 • 22440898 / 22452383 /

22164000/ 22450050

E-mail: advaita@vsnl.com &

mail@advaitaashrama.org

Cover: Sunset over the Garhwal range, Himalayas, with Swami Vivekananda's quotation in the foreground.

उत्तिष्ठत
जाग्रत
प्राप्य
वरान्निबोधत ।

PRABUDDHA BHARATA

Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!

Vol. 111

MARCH 2006

No. 3



Traditional Wisdom



Ṛta: COSMIC ORDER

सत्येनोत्तमिता भूमिः सूर्येणोत्तमिता द्यौः । ऋतेनादित्यास्तिष्ठन्ति दिवि सोमो अधि श्रितः ॥
Truth is the base that bears the earth; by Sūrya are the heavens sustained. By *ṛta* the
Ādityas stand secure, and Soma holds his place in heaven. (Rig Veda, 10.85.1)

ऋतस्य हि शुरुधः सन्ति पूर्वीऋतस्य धीतिर्वृजिनानि हन्ति ।
ऋतस्य श्लोको बधिरा ततर्द कर्णा बुधानः शुचमान आयोः ॥
Ṛta has varied food that strengthens; thought of *ṛta* removes transgressions. The
praise-hymn of *ṛta*—arousing, glowing—has opened the deaf ears of the living.
(4.23.8)

जानन्त्यहः प्रथमस्य नाम शुक्रा कृष्णादजनिष्ट श्वितीची ।
ऋतस्य योषा न मिनाति धामाहरहर्निष्कृतमाचरन्ती ॥
She (Uṣā) who has knowledge of the first day's nature is born refulgent white from out
the darkness. The maiden breaks not the law of *ṛta*, day by day coming to the place ap-
pointed. (1.123.9)

अयमस्मि जरितः पश्य मेह विश्वा जातान्यभ्यस्मि मद्भा ।
ऋतस्य मा प्रदिशो वर्धयन्त्यादर्दिरो भुवना दर्दरीमि ॥
I [the Divine] exist, O (doubting) Invoker! Look at me here. All that exists I surpass in
grandeur. The commandants of *ṛta* make me mighty. When I rend, I rend the worlds
asunder. (8.100.4)

इमे चेतारो अनृतस्य भूरेर्मित्रो अर्यमा वरुणे हि सन्ति ।
इम ऋतस्य वावृधुर्दुरोणे शग्मासः पुत्रा अदितेरदब्धाः ॥
These (deities) Mitra, Aryamā and Varuṇa, are the chastisers of all guile and falsehood.
These, Aditi's sons, infallible and mighty, have waxen in the home of the eternal *ṛta*.
(7.60.5)

∞ This Month ∞

This month's editorial, **Crime and Punishment - I**, takes a brief look at the rationale behind the various methods that our society has evolved for dealing with criminal behaviour over the centuries.

In **Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago** we get a rejoinder to a radical view of the loss of life in war as expressed in a contemporary journal, *Light*.

Experiences in Correctional Homes is an overview of the welfare work among the inmates of various correctional homes of West Bengal initiated by the Ramakrishna Mission on the occasion of Sri Sarada Devi's 150th birth anniversary. The author, Swami Divyanandaji, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Malda, is actively involved in these service and rehabilitation efforts.

It is only recently that prisons in India have been rechristened 'correctional homes' and efforts have been made to foster attitudinal changes that match this change in name. Sri Joydeb Chakrabarty, Inspector General, Correctional Services, Government of West Bengal, has played an important role in this transformation. We have his perspicacious views in the article **From Prison to Temple of Reform**.

Sri Amal Kumar Ghosh, Superintendent, Howrah District Correctional Home, is one of the most senior officers involved in correctional efforts. **Correctional Homes: How to Be Worthy of the Name** is a brief narrative of his experiences.

Crime and Reform is another brief insight into the world behind bars from Sri C R Ghorai, Superintendent, Malda District Cor-

rectional Home.

Dr Sanat Kumar Banerjee, a former research physicist, Department of Textiles, Government of India, has been one of the many volunteers involved in the Ramakrishna Mission's services for the correctional-home inmates. He recounts his experiences in **Reclaiming Life**.

On Reformation of Prisoners is a perceptive account of the transformation of criminals, prison reforms, the spirit underlying the service activities of the Ramakrishna Mission, and how all of these overlap. The author, Prof. Prabhas Chandra Dhar, is former Professor of English, Tripura University.

Biotechnology is deemed *the* technology for the twenty-first century. But it is also rife with a host of ethical problems. Prof. Amalendu Chakraborty, former Head, Department of Philosophy, Presidency College, Kolkata, critiques some of these issues in **Biotechnology and Human Dignity**.

Those who label Swami Vivekananda as 'reformer' or 'revivalist' fail to read his deeper dimensions. 'Unless we are able to catch Sri Ramakrishna resonating in him, we will never know his true identity.' This is forcefully argued by Swami Sandarshanandaji of Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Deoghar, in the concluding part of **Understanding Vivekananda**.

Violated Divinity records the poignant story of an inmate of a Bengal prison, deprived of her humanity and yet touched by the Divine. The narrative is an adapted translation from the Bengali autobiographical work *Louhakat* by 'Jarasandha'.

Crime and Punishment - I

EDITORIAL

Artisans shall, in accordance with their agreement as to time, place, and form of work, fulfil their engagements. Those who postpone their engagements under the excuse that no agreement as to time, place, and form of work has been entered into shall, except in troubles and calamities, not only forfeit one fourth of their wages, but also be punished with a fine equal to twice the amount of their wages.

Those who conspire to lower the quality of the works of artisans, to hinder or raise their income, or to obstruct their sale or purchase shall be fined a thousand *panas*.

Physicians undertaking medical treatment without intimating (to the government) the dangerous nature of the disease shall, if the patient dies, be punished with the first amercement. If the death of a patient under treatment is due to carelessness in the treatment, the physician shall be punished with the middlemost amercement. Growth of disease due to negligence or indifference (*karmavadha*) of a physician shall be regarded as assault or violence.

If in the above clauses of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (about 4th century BCE) we are able to discern the rudiments of modern laws on quality control, anti-trust regulations and consumer rights, they also serve as reminders that matters of current administrative and judicial interest are human concerns that have been relevant in all organized societies cutting across time and place. Every social group has had to confront delinquent behaviour and every society has been engaged in controlling and punishing criminals. Perceptions about what constitutes criminal behaviour have changed over time as have notions of punishment, but certain general principles do allow themselves to be identified and are worthy of study.

Cataloguing Crime

Vyavahāra and *vivāda* are the traditional

Indian terms for a legal dispute and the ancient Indian legal texts (*dharmashastra* or *smṛiti*) enumerate eighteen common categories of dispute (*vyavahārapada*). These are again divided into the two broad categories of civil disputes, pertaining to wealth or property (*artha mūla*), and criminal disputes involving violence (*himsā mūla*). The latter include *sāhasa* (murder and related violence), *daṇḍapāruṣya* (assault and battery), *strīsaṅgraha* (adultery and rape) and *vākṣpāruṣya* (defamation and abuse). The fourteen common civil disputes range from *ṛṇādāna* (recovery of debt), *dāyabhāga* (partition of wealth), *sambhūya-samutthāna* (partnership disputes) and *saṁvid-vyatikrama* (violation of compacts) to *vetanasya-anapākarma* (non-payment of wages), *abhyupetya-aśuśrūṣā* (non-rendition of service), *svāmipāla-vivāda* (dispute between master and servant) and *steya* (theft). The twofold classification also fits in well with the redress claimed: *deya* (a material payment) or *daṇḍa* (corporal punishment). In the English common law too the reparation defined the crime: i) felony (a grave crime, leading to capital punishment), and ii) misdemeanour (lesser crimes, punishable with fines or imprisonment). The categorization was, however, often fuzzy. For instance, a theft was always a felony but fraud was misdemeanour.

Why Punish?

Any victim of crime will find this question absurd, so central is the idea of *retribution* to the human concept of justice. The law of retaliation (*lex talionis*) was the basis of the Code of Hammurabi in ancient Babylon, the Law of Twelve Tables in Rome as well as the legal injunctions of the *Manu Smṛiti*. The principle of *ṛta* or cosmic order that was conceived of in Vedic times included both the natural order as

witnessed in the laws of nature and the moral order characterized by the law of karma. Thus retribution was seen as the natural moral order of things and punishment meted out by the judicial agencies was only a part of the divine retribution that one must reap as a consequence of one's wrongs. Hence the Rig Vedic rishi affirmed: 'O Agni! May the evil spirit who injures *rta* by *anṛta* be thrice bound in thy fetters.' (In fact, the idea of divine retribution was occasionally evoked as an argument against cruel punishments.)

The moral angle to punishment is highlighted in the concept of *prāyaścitta* or *expiation*. Social wrongs can be requited by fines and recompense, but according to the ancient Indian lawmakers, the *smṛitikāras*, personal moral stain required the working out of individual contrition through expiations before one could feel reasonably absolved of one's moral guilt. Nevertheless, there was always a degree of overlap between retributive punishment and expiation. Harsh corporal punishment could itself constitute the expiation for many crimes, if taken in that spirit, and some of the expiations prescribed in the *smṛitis* could actually end in death.

A central concern of the 'rule of law' is to prevent the wronged persons from taking the law into their own hands in their urge for revenge. The *Yajñavalkya* and *Narada Smṛitis* state that 'if a person, without complaining to the king, sets out to secure what is denied by the opposite side or is doubtful, he becomes liable to punishment'. Punishment thus has a twofold *educative value* for society. On the one hand it confirms the law-abiding citizens in their belief in justice as a natural order of things; on the other hand it prevents the less scrupulous from indulging in anti-social behaviour by making the offenders suffer a high cost for their errant behaviour. The latter is in fact another function of punishment: *deterrence*.

The Mahabharata notes that 'people do not commit sins through fear of punishment at the hands of the king, through fear of Yama and

the next world, and through fear of others [public opinion and retribution]'. *Danda*, the Sanskrit term for punishment itself implies restraint. A sizeable proportion of crimes are supposed to be rational, and potential offenders are likely to estimate the risks over benefits in committing a crime. By suitably adjusting the severity of punishment a significant proportion of such potential offenders are prevented from criminal acts. For those who do end up committing a crime, punishment acts as a secondary deterrent, preventing recidivism.

It is very difficult to empirically judge the deterrent effect of punishments, for a large proportion of offenders never get booked. This holds good for second-time offenders too. But for those who are obviously recalcitrant, various means of *incapacitation* have been devised to minimize social harm. Incarceration in prisons is the commonest form of incapacitation at present. In pre-modern times, however, banishment and capital punishment were considered the surest remedies for heinous crimes.

Evolution of Prisons

The English common law treated felonies with death or transportation for life (usually to the Americas or to Australia); misdemeanours were punished with fines. Thus imprisonment as punishment for crimes was not common till the eighteenth century. A similar pattern obtained in India too, although reference to jails is common in ancient Indian texts. Kautilya, for instance, prescribes the construction of a jail (*bandhanāgāra*) in the capital town 'provided with separate accommodation for men and women kept apart, and with many well-guarded compartments'.

The movement from capital and mutilating punishment and from transportation for life to imprisonment represented a shift towards more humane treatment of criminal offenders. It would, however, be wrong to take this as a modern phenomenon. Kautilya says, 'When the superintendent of jails puts any person in lock-up without declaring the grounds of

provocation, he shall be fined twenty-four *panas*; when he subjects any person to unjust torture, forty-eight *panas*; when he transfers a prisoner to another place, or deprives a prisoner of food and water, ninety-six *panas*; when he troubles or receives bribes from a prisoner, he shall be punished with the middlemost amercement; when he beats a prisoner to death, he shall be fined a thousand *panas*.'

Kautilya also lays down rules for commutation of prison terms: 'On the days to which the birth star of the king is assigned, as well as on full-moon days, such prisoners as are young, old, diseased, or helpless (*anātha*) shall be let out from the jail; or those who are of charitable disposition. ... Once in a day or once in five nights, jails may be emptied of prisoners in consideration of the work they have done, or of whipping inflicted upon them, or of an adequate ransom paid by them in gold.' This has some resemblance to the modern practice of remission of sentences dependent on good in-custody behaviour, which is a common practice across the globe.

Towards Humane Correction

In the Mahabharata, prince Satyavat is found arguing with his father, Dyumatsena, in favour of light punishment even for grave offences. 'When the capital punishment is handed out to robbers', he argues, 'several innocent persons—the wife, mother, father and daughter—are virtually killed [being their dependents].' Satyavat favours letting off such offenders once they give themselves up to religious priests, vow not to repeat the offence and undertake suitable penance.

Fa Hsien has recorded the generous attitude to criminals in 'middle India' (*madhyadesha*) at the beginning of the fifth century CE: 'Criminals are simply fined, lightly or heavily according to the circumstances. Even in circumstances of repeated attempts at wicked rebellion, they only have their right hands cut off.'

Closely associated with such humane approach to major criminals are the concepts of

reformation and *rehabilitation*. These are reflected in the new nomenclature for prisons: reformatories and correctional homes. These concepts are based on the assumption that criminal behaviour is maladaptive behaviour that can be altered. It is also a tacit assumption of the fact that unjust and inequitable social conditions are often responsible for the criminal response of victims.

Unfortunately, attempts at reform and rehabilitation can themselves turn coercive and can seriously impinge on freedom of thought and behaviour. This has been especially known to happen when strong political or religious ideologies are imposed on convicts. The Chinese concept of the ideological reform of prisoners during the Cultural Revolution is one such example. For religious groups working with prisoners the concept of *śiva jñāne jīva sevā*, service to humans as worship of the Divine, as propounded and practised by Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda, serves as a very useful code against abuse of religious privilege. Failing to privilege the rights, thoughts and feelings of the people we serve, though they be convicts, leaves room for abuse of human rights, and this needs to be strictly guarded against.

Rehabilitation in our country, where the majority of correctional-home inmates belong to the poorer sections of society, must needs focus on socio-economic measures. The *Narada Smṛiti* states that even when a king orders the confiscation of an offender's property he must not deprive him of his tools of trade, for doing that would amount to deprivation of living. In modern times any rehabilitative programme must help ensure proper means of livelihood.

The Ramakrishna Mission's work in the correctional homes of West Bengal aims at helping in the rehabilitative process by providing both occupational assistance and insights in personal transformation. We take a look at these efforts, in the general context of correctional endeavours, in this and the next issue. *

Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago

March 1906

In a late Sermon by Mr. Voysey, on "The Hand of God in Modern History," there is a curious attempt to dissipate the horrors of the loss of life in the late Russian-Japanese war. "Wholesale slaughter, you say," cries the preacher, "and you exclaim and think me mad for defending it! My answer is where are the victims at this moment? The slain are even now alive with God, and, as we believe, in a better and happier world than ours."

'That thought has often occurred to us. Everyone has to die some time; and that, say, 30,000 men die together and swiftly is not really as distressing as 30,000 men dying separately, and after lingering illnesses, with drawn-out pain; and, if we can add, as we surely can, Mr. Voysey's belief that all go to a better and happier world, the horror of the battle-field ought to be vastly diminished.'

—*Light*

Our contemporary of *Light* is as a rule so sane and sensible that we are not a little surprised at his above remarks. It is very true that 'everyone has to die some time,' but surely that is no argument for suicide or murder. And why not? Because these deaths generate feelings and thoughts infinitely injurious not only to the minds of the perpetrators but to the general collective mind of humanity. These injuries may be grouped under the heads, extreme weakness, wanton self-indulgence and utter disregard of justice. An existence on earth is the effect of certain causes, an embodiment of several forces working themselves out towards a definite object. To cut off an existence is to throw these forces violently back and retard their progress. The act of deliberately putting an end to a life therefore not only prevents, even if for a time, the natural evolution of the forces represented by that life, but calls forth and concretises the groups of feelings mentioned above, which are hurtful to the evolution of the murderer's mind as well as to the collective mind of which it is a part.

The error in the statement that '30,000 men dying together and swiftly is not really as distressing as 30,000 men dying separately, and after lingering illnesses, with drawn-out pain,' will now be evident. The sudden and violent overthrow of the forces of being working themselves out harmoniously towards their goal as represented by 30,000 men murdered in battle, causes delay in and injuriously affect[s] the evolution of their mental organisations which do not die, and give[s] birth to and intensifies the feelings of brutal self-assertion and the tendency to kill, with all their consequent degrading influences. It is no doubt distressing to think of '30,000 men dying ... with drawn-out pain,' but the process involved therein is one of natural and lawful working out of forces generated by the sufferers, payment of debts incurred; no lowering of self and others, and no spread of poisonous infection to the whole mind. And again, who can deny the beneficent value of pain?

Our contemporary further states: 'and, if we can add, as we surely can, Mr. Voysey's belief that all go to a better and happier world, the horror of the battle-field ought to be greatly diminished.' Surely our friend does not believe that the mere fact of passing into the other world makes life better and happier for all, but as is well stated by a writer in the *Progressive Thinker*, (quoted in *Light*, No. 1, 294) 'That happiness, or misery, in the future state depends upon the character of the life lived here,—upon the degree of moral and mental unfoldment gained in this world.' We need hardly point out the irrationality of the 'cataclysmal' view of life in the next world taken by *Light*.

—Occasional Notes

Experiences in Correctional Homes

SWAMI DIVYANANDA

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's 150th birth anniversary celebrations in 2003-04 witnessed the inauguration of several new service programmes by the branch centres of the Ramakrishna Order. These programmes aimed specifically at reaching out to the masses—especially women and the poorer sections of society. It was a remarkable coinci-



An inmate speaks at a function in Malda prison

dence that Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Malda, got a chance to initiate a programme of service for the inmates of Malda District Correctional Home during these celebrations; and this programme has since been extended to a number of other correctional homes across West Bengal.

A Literacy Programme with a Difference

It all began this way: A literacy centre was being conducted at Malda District Correctional Home to help the illiterate inmates gain basic literacy. Unfortunately, it so happened that the teacher conducting the programme got a job as a clerk in the correctional home and the centre was left without a teacher. A local journalist who was on a visit to the place at this time was requested by the inmates to do something to revive the literacy centre. The journalist was a devotee associated with the local Ramakri-

shna Mission Ashrama, and he conveyed the request to us on 2 February 2003. Impressed by the enthusiasm of the inmates of the correctional home we offered to the district magistrate to take over the teaching programme. The district magistrate gave his consent to our proposal the very next day and thus our service programme was launched.

From the very outset we decided not to confine ourselves merely to the giving of 'knowledge of letters' but to make our programme more meaningful to the inmates at a personal level. So, besides instructions in basic literacy, our programme also included discussions on issues pertaining to ethics and character-building, sessions on enhancing concentration and the practice of meditation, study of the lives of Swami Vivekananda and other great personalities, recitation of inspiring poetry, and the practice of drawing and other creative arts. The sessions are conducted by the monastics and some senior devotees of the Ashrama and run for two hours every day, six days a week.

A library was also started within the pre-



Inmates listening to Ramakrishna Mission swamis



Literacy class at the Malda correctional home

mises of the correctional home. Books are lent out thrice a week. Ashrama volunteers help out with the running of the library. Presently the library has a thousand volumes to meet the reading needs of the three-hundred-odd inmates. Around fifty to sixty volumes are lent out on every working day. But what about those who cannot read? The literate inmates decided to overcome this problem by conducting readings from the lives of great persons every evening in the ten wards of the jail especially for the benefit of the not-yet-literate.

Vocational Training

Encouraged by the positive response of the inmates as well as the authorities, the Ashrama decided to extend its services by taking up vocational training courses. Six sewing machines were put up at the correctional home for instruction in tailoring. An expert tailor trains the inmates for two hours, six days a week. Twenty inmates are presently undergoing this training.



A tailoring class in progress

Another twenty inmates are undergoing training in carpentry with a competent carpenter. Bookbinding is being taught to fifteen inmates twice a week. Agriculture and fishery experts also take special classes for the inmates. As a good number of the inmates are agricultural workers and fishermen, they are expected to benefit from these sessions when they return to their homes and workplaces. Incense stick and candle manufacturing are also being taught. Artistic talent is fostered through drawing and recitation classes. Competent doctors also regularly visit and conduct health-awareness classes on tuberculosis, leprosy, diarrhoeal diseases, snake-bite, drowning and related themes of practical interest to the local community.



Carpentry trainees in their workshop

For many of the inmates training alone does not ensure a livelihood, as they lack the means to start a fresh entrepreneurial venture on their own. Over the last two and a half years thirty-two inmates trained in tailoring, carpentry and bookbinding have been helped by the Ashrama with machines and tools to set up their own businesses on release.

Extension of Work to Other Correctional Homes

Soon after this service programme was initiated in the Malda correctional home, several devotees of the Tufanganj Ramakrishna Ashrama (a non-affiliated centre) took up a similar programme at the local correctional home under our guidance. Ramakrishna Math, Cooch Behar, also took up a similar programme with

the direct involvement of sadhus and brahmacharins. As the work spread to other correctional homes across West Bengal many devoted volunteers came forward to help. Presently there are about a hundred such highly dedicated and competent volunteers helping out with the successful conduct of the multifarious activities in various correctional homes. They include teachers, headmasters, doctors, engineers and government officials (attached to the departments of land revenue, tribal welfare, geological survey and such others—many of them in top positions). Each of them has been devoting three to four hours of their spare time every week at the correctional homes.

Our vocational-training instructors offer their services at nominal rates (fifteen rupees per hour) paid by the Ashrama. Sri Swapan Saha, the tailoring instructor at Balurghat is himself orthopaedically handicapped. He said to us, 'I am physically handicapped and these inmates are mentally handicapped. That is why they keep coming back to jail. For a physically handicapped person to be able to help someone mentally handicapped is an opportunity for service. I have my small business to meet my requirements. I will not take a remuneration for this work. Please put the money to some good use.' Such commitment and concern are a great encouragement to us.

Our work was rapidly extended to other correctional homes across West Bengal—to those at Howrah, Alipore (Kolkata), Siliguri, Raiganj and Islampur (North Dinajpur), Bal-



A value-education seminar at Balurghat jail

urghat (South Dinajpur), Krishnanagar (Nadia), Berhampore (Murshidabad), and Seuri (Birbhum). In all of these places we have established libraries with 250-500 books each—in Bengali, Hindi and English. Besides the publications of the Ramakrishna Mission, religious texts like the Quran, Bible, Sermon on the Mount, *Jagater Dharmaguru* (Religious Teachers of the World), lives of Muslim saints, books on Islamic morals (several of them published in Bangladesh), travelogues, biographies of great personalities, books about scientists and their discoveries, and vocational texts pertaining to art, drawing, agriculture, bee-keeping, pisciculture and animal husbandry are kept in these libraries.

Out of curiosity we once asked the inmates of the Malda correctional home if they were actually reading the books or just borrowing them to glance through. Their reply was prompt: we could question them on the subjects and check for ourselves. Later we organized quiz competitions, and found that hardly any question went unanswered. For instance, in a quiz on Swami Vivekananda fifteen rounds totalling 105 questions failed to resolve the winners; another five rounds were needed for that purpose. We encouraged the participants with prizes for the top three positions. The same thing has been repeated time and again in the other correctional homes.

Two computers have been installed at Alipore Central Correctional Home by the Malda Ashrama, with help from Peerless Gen-

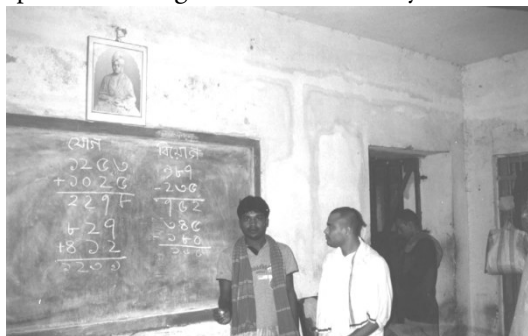


Inauguration of the library at Krishnanagar jail

eral Finance and Investment Company, at a total cost of about forty thousand rupees. Besides their use in computer-applications training these computers are also being used for general and spiritual education. Ashrama devotees with specialized knowledge of computers help with the training on weekends.

Ramakrishna Mission Janashiksha Mandir is providing training in tailoring, carpentry, fast-food preparation and two-wheeler repair at Howrah District Correctional Home. The Ramakrishna Mission centres of Tamluk, Contai and Jalpaiguri have also begun welfare work for the local correctional-home inmates.

The correctional homes at Alipore, Malda and Balurghat have some convicted students as inmates. They have been helped to complete their studies with provision of textbooks and special coaching classes conducted by the devo-



Learning arithmetic in Malda jail

tees of the Malda Ashrama. Sri Prabhat Ranjan Ghosh, a teacher of repute, conducts classes in mathematics at the Alipore correctional home, and Dr Kamal Nandi teaches physics. Many other teachers also join them. Several retired officials participating in this teaching activity say that they never got such joy in their working days. They say: 'The opportunity to work amongst these neglected people, whom we would earlier often consider sinners, has proved very inspiring. If only we had started earlier we would have earned greater punya.'

The Bratachari movement, initiated by the noted civil servant Sri Gurusaday Datta at Seuri in the Birbhum district of West Bengal in



A Bratachari-drill demonstration at Malda jail

1932, is a comprehensive programme of physical, mental, and intellectual culture based on the best folk traditions of physical exercise, art, dance, drama, music, singing and social service. We encourage the inmates to conduct these programmes within the correctional homes. Sports and games—both indoor and outdoor—for physical fitness are also arranged by the Ashrama. Annual sports meets have been conducted at the Malda, Krishnanagar and other correctional homes. These have been attended by many senior administrative and police officials.

Our main aim has always been to help the inmates return to the mainstream of society as conscientious and responsible members. Two of our literacy class students contributed five hundred rupees each towards tsunami relief work. This was their savings from the wages they received from work in the jail. These wages are a nominal sum (about fifteen rupees per day) and this money they would normally send to their own families. We have also been approached by the inmates to help with their children's schooling or with the treatment of the sick in their families. The Ashrama has responded to these requests. Recently one such boy has joined our boys' hostel.

Nearly ninety per cent of the inmates are from poor families. The government cannot as yet provide all their basic necessities. We help out with provision of saris, lungis, warm clothing in winter, spectacles for the visually impaired, toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, and

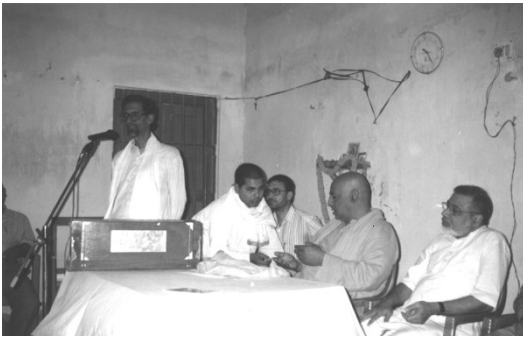
other such items of daily use in Malda, Balurghat and Islampur jails.

An allopathic physician attends to patients in Malda jail for two hours daily, seven days a week. Several homeopaths—including Br Amleshachaitanya, a monastic member of our Ashrama, who is also a trained homeopath—see patients once a week.

Ishaq Muhammad is a teacher. He suffers from hypertension and some cardiac ailments for which he had to be taken to hospital from the correctional home. His son came and told us that his father wanted us to visit him, for that



Exhibition on Sri Sarada Devi at Malda jail



Ishaq Muhammad addressing the audience at a function

would bring him peace. Some of us went to see him at the district hospital. He welcomed us with great feeling. We make such hospital visits off and on to keep the sick inmates happy. The prisoners too remember us wherever they are.

Welfare Activities for Women

The women inmates of Balurghat jail are being trained in handicrafts and singing. Similar programmes for women convicts are being undertaken at Cooch Behar. A touching incident occurred when we were distributing sweets at the Siliguri correctional home during the inauguration of the new library there. One of the women inmates started weeping and said, 'You are giving us Krishna's prasad (she thought it was so), but why has He placed me in such a painful situation?' I said to her, 'Ma, do you remember for what length of time Krishna's own mother was in prison? Seven of her eight children were born in prison and were

brutally murdered soon after birth. Krishna Himself was born in jail. Also remember how Jesus suffered in life. He was crucified.' A Nigerian prisoner, who happened to be nearby, also started weeping on hearing this. I also said, 'Pray to God for mental peace and think of the welfare of all.' Then she said, 'Bhagavan Krishna won't be offended with me, will He?' As I assured her that He would not, I was reminded of Swami Vivekananda's emphatic statement that divinity resides in every being. Incidents such as these have revealed to us the truth of Swamiji's words.

When we started the training programme in candle-making for women prisoners at the Malda correctional home, several inmates voiced similar sentiments: 'Why are we in jail?' Incidentally, it may be worth noting here that a majority of the undertrials would ultimately be declared not guilty. We cannot secure the re-



Women inmates of Balurghat jail at a value-education class

lease of these prisoners. We try to get them some peace of mind even when they spend time in confinement. They remember their children and other family members and this makes them sad. We have introduced prayers to soothe their sadness. Engagement in prison activities (including reading, drawing and singing) also keeps them in good cheer. We also tell them to encourage their children to study well when they come to meet them. At the beginning not all women were willing to participate in the training, but within a few days all of them had changed their minds. There are at present about twelve women volunteers helping out with women's programmes at Raiganj, Balurghat and Malda.

Provision of Legal Aid

Several inmates at the Malda correctional home are not able to pay for their lawyers and so the judicial hearing of their cases is getting delayed. We have helped five such inmates through lawyers closely associated with our



Media highlights of the Ramakrishna Mission's work in correctional homes

Ashrama. Advocate Gajendranath Saha has been providing legal aid free of charge.

Rafiqul Islam had been arrested on charges of pickpocketing. Four hundred rupees were to be deposited as security for him to be bailed out. His father was employed with the police department and did not come forward with the money out of shame. Sri Saha and Sri Barin Ghosh, another devotee, came forward as guarantors for Rafiqul. The judge told Rafiqul to visit the Ashrama once in three months when he came to attend

court. Rafiqul has obeyed the judge all these months.

We have been speaking primarily about the efforts made by Ramakrishna Mission centres for the welfare of the correctional-home inmates. More wonderful is the story of these inmates' efforts at self-help and the noble sentiments of help, harmony and service that they cherish. But that must wait until next month.

(To be concluded)

Crime: The Roles of Disposition and Situation

Political scientist James Q Wilson and criminologist George Kelling outlined a novel theory that crime is a product of individual criminal disposition and situational conditions of public disorder. When people see abandoned cars in the streets, graffiti everywhere and broken windows not covered, it is a sign that no one really cares about that neighbourhood. That perception of public disorder or disarray then lowers inhibitions against further destructive or criminal actions of those who are not ordinarily criminal. Their solution to crime: remove abandoned cars, paint out graffiti and fix broken windows. When that advice was followed in New York City, crime rates dropped significantly the next year.

—Philip G Zimbardo

From Prison to Temple of Reform

JOYDEB CHAKRABARTY

From Policing to Caring

Life can be construed as a series of events. That I was posted as Inspector General, Correctional Services, Government of West Bengal, at the fag end of my career was one such incident in my life. I was left with less than three years of service at that time. Immediately on joining the post I realized that I had to look after the very criminals and anti-socials who had been my nightmares during the previous thirty-three years of my career; I had to take care of their physical and mental well-being while they were in prison. So I took it as a challenge and changed the attitude I had so long maintained towards this class of people, and devoted myself fully to the task I was supposed to carry out.

Two things helped me in changing my attitude without much difficulty: one, prisons were being referred to as ‘correctional homes’ and, two, the main focus of the administrative staff of these correctional homes was on reformation of the inmates. It reminded me of Swami Vivekananda’s concepts regarding reformation of prisoners, and I was happy that his dreams were being realized—more so because I would be instrumental in implementing his ideas, even if for a short time and within a limited area only.

A few days after assuming office I paid a visit to a central correctional home. As I entered the place the inmates greeted me with flowers grown by them, standing in two rows on either side in a disciplined manner. It appeared to me that despite being fully aware of my background as a police officer, and in spite of the fact that some of my colleagues had been responsible for putting them behind bars, they did not seem to bear any grudge against me as a class enemy.

Imprisonment Is Not Conviction

As days rolled by and I gathered experience, I deduced that about 75% to 80% of the inmates were undertrials, of whom 5% to 10% would be convicted in due course by the courts; the rest would either be discharged or acquitted. I felt much pity for the last category and so started motivating my officers and men to be kind and humane towards the inmates while discharging their duties as per law. Those who would ultimately be found not guilty and be declared innocent in the eye of law, appeared to me to be inside correctional homes merely due to their bad luck. Whatever comforts they were provided with inside the homes, they would be cursing their fate, accusing society and blaming the prison administration.

The administration of correctional homes is regulated by rules framed by the authorities from time to time. These rules cover every detail. They provide for the inmates’ food, accommodation and medical care. They also allow interviews with relatives at stipulated intervals. In order to actualize the concept of the correctional home, jail authorities have to guard against loopholes, malpractices and corruption; they have to implement new schemes for the all-round betterment of the atmosphere inside the homes, thereby making the inmates’ lives easier and more meaningful; and bearing in mind that ‘an idle brain is the devil’s workshop’, they have to keep the inmates engaged in useful work, physical or mental, so that once having gone through the process they would come out reformed.

Implementing Welfare Measures

All this sounds well in theory, but implementation of these ideas is an uphill task which government machinery alone may not be able



Sewing and cane craft are taught at Lalgola open-air jail

to accomplish. 'Nobody is a born criminal; it is society that makes them criminal.' If that be so, it is society's bounden duty to come forward to help the prison administration in the reformation and rehabilitation of the so-called criminals. So we decided to welcome reputed NGOs and other social agencies to carry out their literacy and vocational-training programmes and such other schemes for the benefit of the inmates. There has been very good response from different organizations and many of them are training the inmates in vocations like carpentry, tailoring, knitting, toy-making, bookbinding, painting, and so on. Some NGOs have been visiting correctional homes with reputed psychiatrists to take care of the mental health of our wards and instil confidence in their hearts. The Vivekananda International Health Centre has been working in all central correctional homes of the state under the overall guidance of the West Bengal Directorate of Health Services to create an awareness among the inmates regard-



A health-awareness class at Howrah jail

ing AIDS. Don Bosco Dhrubajyoti has been conducting courses in automobile mechanics and giving driving lessons to the inmates of Berhampore Central Correctional Home for seven years. Other institutions, for example Art of Living, have been working successfully in different correctional homes to bring about attitudinal changes among hard-core criminals.

The introduction of 'music therapy', which has gained worldwide acceptance, is one of several new innovations in West Bengal correctional homes. Now inmates of all central/district/special correctional homes can listen to elevating music played from centrally located public-address systems. Though instrumental music is preferred in the mornings to create a refreshing effect in the minds of the in-



Women inmates present a cultural event at Presidency jail

mates and help them overcome boredom, our correctional homes also possess a rich stock of cassettes, especially of devotional songs, bhajans and Tagore songs, which are played mainly in the afternoon. After the government kindly permitted the Inspector General of Correctional Services to accept material donations from recognized NGOs and other public bodies for the welfare of the inmates, appeals were sent to renowned artistes and recording companies for donations of cassettes. To say the least, I was overwhelmed to find that there were so many noble people in our society who would readily respond to a good cause.

Gradually I realized that it would not be possible for me to visit all our correctional

homes frequently or address the inmates and staff regularly to share my thoughts with them. So I taped my thoughts and feelings and distributed copies of the cassette to all the correctional homes so that they could be used at intervals for the benefit of the inmates and staff. I was gratified when many inmates wrote to me saying they would never have resorted to crime had they heard such a message earlier. A collection of morals and teachings titled *Bhalo Jodi Houa Jay Mondo Ki?* (What Harm in Being Good?), which has been compiled from religious books, earned much appreciation from one and all, including the media! It is now being read out to the inmates every day. Besides, many cultural programmes have been organized within the homes during the last two years in which established artistes have performed free of charge. It is their way of fulfilling their social responsibilities.

Involvement of the Ramakrishna Mission

Thus inspired, and confident about my work, I approached Swami Smaranananda, the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, requesting him to instruct all their branch centres in West Bengal to come to our aid with educational or vocational-training schemes for the inmates of correctional homes in their vicinity. After hearing from Swami Divyanandaji about the work he had already started at Malda District Correctional Home, the General Secretary encouraged Mission branches to take up similar work. In no time, Divyanandaji, with his undaunted zeal, helped extend these activities across the entire state covering a good number of correctional homes. The work includes donation of Mission publications, establishment of libraries, initiating literacy programmes, imparting

vocational skills like tailoring, carpentry, candle-making, pisciculture and computer training and, most importantly, organization of mass prayers. The inmates' response has been highly positive. Many of them have already joined the social mainstream after release and are leading normal lives.

Since the inmates of the correctional homes do not have to bother about day-to-day family affairs, I feel that some of them can actually live like monks—at least for the time being—with the right mental orientation and inculcation of the missionary spirit. In fact, there is one Muslim inmate in the Malda correctional home who says he would prefer not to leave the

home, if he is given the option. He has been taking regular classes on Ramakrishna and Vivekananda for quite some time now! So I am quite hopeful that over time our correctional homes can be made ideal places for missionary work. But for this to happen, the present efforts of the Ramakrishna Mission have to be sustained and the prison administration must nourish these initiatives and cooperate with them wholeheartedly. This will, of course, require an extra effort on the part of the prison authorities, beyond



Prizewinners at Presidency jail

their routine administrative responsibilities.

I can only pray to the Almighty to bless us all—the dedicated monks and devotees of the Ramakrishna Mission, the other NGOs, the jail administration and inmates—with the strength to work for our own self-development and for the uplift of our less fortunate brethren. In this continuous process there is no room for complacency or negligence. We must all work remembering the words of the Bhagavadgita: 'To work alone you have the right, not to the fruits thereof.'

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Correctional Homes: How to Be Worthy of the Name

AMAL KUMAR GHOSH

From Prison to Correctional Home

The West Bengal Correctional Services Act XXXII was passed by the West Bengal Legislature in 1992 and was assented to by the President of India on 13 June 1997, vide communication No. 1550L. Since then, the state's jails have been renamed as 'correctional homes'.

The idea of a correctional home, however, is not a novel one. In a letter which Swami Vivekananda wrote to Alasinga Perumal on 20 August 1893 from Metcalf, Massachusetts, he narrates his visit to a women's prison accompanied by one Mrs Johnson, the prison's superintendent. He describes how well the inmates were treated, how their character was rectified, and how after reformation the women became useful members of society.

It is this idea that the above-mentioned act proposes to emulate. A new code has been drawn up to guide prison officials and staff and many state-level officers have been trained at motivation camps. Training camps have also been held at the national level after the promulgation of the Protection of Human Rights Act in 1993.

Such motivation is expected to prompt a person to work for the well-being of others. But mere lectures and classes cannot provide adequate motivation to the concerned officials to work for prisoners' welfare. It took constant pressure from the Human Rights Commission to bring about the necessary change in attitude.

The jail is a place isolated from society and guarded by high walls; it has only one entry or exit point. Prisoners are committed to this kind of judicial custody as per court orders for breaking the laws of the land. But not all prisoners are

criminals and anti-socials. The duty of the officials of a correctional home is to manage the huge manpower concentrated in an isolated place and turn it to fruitful, productive purposes. 'No man can be wise on an empty stomach.' So people in charge of prisons should first try to provide healthy, nutritional food for their wards. Then good medical treatment must be arranged for the sick. Finally, the values of love, mercy and goodness must be spread among them.

Promoting Physical and Mental Health

More than 60% of the inmates in our jails are poor and 40% of them are illiterate. Only 30% can read and write effectively. 'Ability is the poor man's wealth.' In order to enable such inmates for different kinds of work, correctional homes must first make them literate and



Annual sports at Krishnanagar jail

then train them in relevant trades. Cultural and recreational programmes in which all can participate must also be introduced in order to improve their physical and mental health.

Though the state government has provided the infrastructure for such purposes in

central correctional homes, district and sub-divisional correctional homes lack them. The author has had wide experience in the management of district correctional homes since 1990



Vegetable produce raised by the inmates of Malda jail

as superintendent. We started extensive gardening and plantation work inside Seuri District Correctional Home. Due to acute water scarcity we used waste water to manage these plantations. We used to call the district magistrate, district judge, a local minister and the municipal chairman when we needed their help and also invite them to attend our cultural functions. All of them have helped us administrators a lot.

Vocational Aid

At Burdwan District Correctional Home, 60% of the area was covered with grass six feet high. We approached the agriculture department for a tractor and requested them to train the inmates in agriculture. The work that followed produced such a huge quantity of potatoes and other vegetables that we would supply them to other correctional homes in Bardhaman, Kolkata and Howrah by truck. We also had reservoirs on the campus; so we started pisciculture with the help of the fisheries department. On successful completion of the training course, we even gave certificates to the inmates which helped them procure loans and become members of fish farmers' cooperatives later on. A fruit-processing unit was also started in the home. A trainer was hired after approval

by the Inspector General of Prisons. Mango jam, jelly and pickles and potato chips were manufactured and sold locally through the prison outlet. Several inmates were also trained in watch repairing and handicrafts.

Besides these, cultural programmes like *jatra* (open-air theatre) too were arranged on a regular basis. District officials, the university registrar and professors, social activists and NGOs used to help us train the inmates in these



Women inmates of Howrah jail present a song at a function

and attend the events. Sports and music competitions were also held. In this way inmates remained in touch with the outside society and also came in contact with high police officers.

In Jalpaiguri, the then district magistrate, Dr Subrata Gupta IAS, helped us greatly in the administration of the correctional home by presenting television sets and musical instruments. Here too district officials and judicial authorities used to encourage us a lot by being present for our cultural events.

Collaboration with the Ramakrishna Mission

However, it was in Malda that we were fortunate enough to come into contact with the Ramakrishna Mission. The Mission happens to be the only NGO that has been working systematically for the all-round development of the inmates with much involvement of money and manpower. Swami Divyanandaji, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Malda, started his work in the field of education. A small

school with four teachers, including a sadhu and a brahmachari, has been running six days a week since 3 February 2003. The swami also set up a 300-book library, where a retired school-teacher serves as the librarian.

Three months later, on 24 May 2003, two tailoring and carpentry schools came into being. Instructors, raw materials, tools and machinery were all supplied by the Mission. Trainees of this school, at the time of their release, are given sewing machines and carpentry tools free of cost so that they can start their own businesses forthwith. Regular workshops in pisciculture and animal husbandry are also conducted, and released inmates are helped with guidance.

Annual sports meets are held on a grand scale funded by the Mission and managed by its volunteers.

The Ramakrishna Mission has done a splendid job in the field of health care too. To begin with, the Mission had the inmates examined by eye specialists and provided seventy-eight spectacles free of cost. Gradually ENT and dental specialists conducted check-ups. Dr Kamal Roy MS even performed tooth extractions at the home itself. Dr S Batabyal MD discussed with the inmates the prevention and cure of various diseases, thus increasing their awareness in these matters. From 7 November 2003 homeopathic medical camps have been held every Friday. Inmates and staff are both examined by a group of doctors led by Dr Subrata Palchowdhury, and medicines are given free. On many occasions Swami Divyanandaji himself distributed toilet soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, shampoo, saris, vests, etc. to the inmates. He is the patron who encourages the commemoration of special days with cultural functions, at the end of which fruits

and sweets are distributed to the inmates. Eminent citizens are invited to attend these functions.

In this way, the Ramakrishna Mission has been relentless in serving people outside the pale of society. It has been working not only in Malda, but also in a dozen other correctional homes across West Bengal—Raiganj, Balurghat, Islampur, Siliguri, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Mekhliganj, Berhampore, Seuri, Krishnanagar, Kolkata, Howrah, etc.

Now the Janashiksha Mandir of Ramakrishna Mission Saradapith, Belur, has started similar work at Howrah District Correctional Home by opening training schools in tailoring,

carpentry, motorcycle repairing and fast-food making. Recently its volunteers (the Vivek Vahini) conducted a seven-day camp at the home, thus helping in the rehabilitation of a few inmates. In fact, one Shibu Das has even been appointed art teacher at the Janashiksha



Swami Divyanandaji addressing a meeting at Malda jail

Mandir. Greatly encouraged by the Janashiksha Mandir's example, many other NGOs are approaching the home's administration with offers of help.

The revered swamis of the Janashiksha Mandir—mainly Swami Ramanandaji, former Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Saradapith, and Swami Muktipradanandaji—have been successful in promoting higher human values in the inmates as well as the staff. Many confirmed and unruly drug addicts have shaken off their habit and become law abiding and peaceful, and have great respect for their benefactors.

Having seen all this at first hand, I can only affirm that well-known statement of Oscar Wilde's: 'Every saint has a past, every sinner has a future.'

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Crime and Reform

C R GHORAI

Crime and punishment are correlatives, generally speaking. It is common knowledge that an offender or lawbreaker will have to suffer imprisonment. The reason behind this age-old idea that criminals have to be punished is to discourage others from evil-doing. But it is unfortunate that in spite of the sanction of punishment for every crime, instead of being controlled, the rate of crime is ever increasing. The variety of crimes being committed by miscreants around the world seems to be in direct proportion to technological advancement. This has necessitated a change in our mode of thinking.

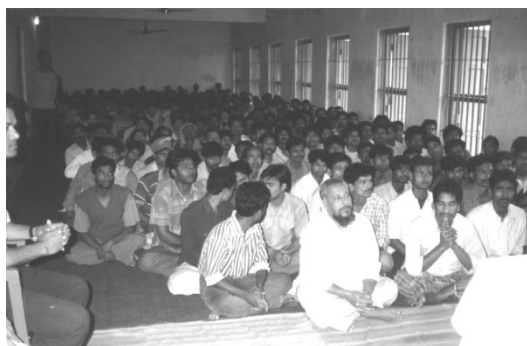
Nowadays psychologists, social workers and reformers suggest reformatory measures. Governments also have welcomed this idea and have been taking steps along these lines. Socio-economic problems being the main cause of most crimes, if basic education and adequate vocational training are provided to misguided and deprived persons, the incidence of crime could be greatly controlled. Those who have become habitual offenders, though, may need some kind of after-release care. So, with the help of NGOs, governments are introducing a number of reformatory measures to improve



Inmates attend a value-education camp at Islampur jail

the all-round environment within the correctional homes and also to ensure good behaviour of the jail staff. In addition to better food, accommodation and health care, inmates are given useful vocational training and reasonable wages, and also provided with facilities for sports and amusement. Yoga therapy and music therapy are two recent innovations. Inmates are also rewarded with early remissions for good conduct.

There was a time when jails were regarded with fear, as purely punitive places. People who came out of them had only tales of sorrow and suffering to tell. Not any more, for today the scene has changed. Taking into account the extent of illiteracy, correctional homes are giving top priority to literacy programmes. The Malda District Correctional Home in West Bengal is one such example. Here NGOs like the local Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Sri Satya Sai Seva Organization and Inner Wheel Club have done commendable work in promoting literacy. The Malda Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, under the active supervision of its Secretary, Swami Divyanandaji, has even engaged regular instructors to teach two to three batches of inmates daily. This non-formal education



Inmates of Malda jail at a religious meeting

has proved immensely popular and has been running for more than two years now.

In addition to this, the Ramakrishna Mission is also imparting vocational training in different trades like tailoring, carpentry and book-binding. At various times, candle-making and incense-stick-rolling have also been taught. Excepting a rare few, most inmates take active interest in acquiring these skills. Some have even received kits—carpentry tools and sewing machines—at the time of release which would help them earn their living once they are outside. This, then, is how prisoner reformation and rehabilitation is being effected.

Apart from preparing the inmates for life outside, these classes and training courses have another great benefit: inmates, or rather apprentices, develop a bond of brotherly love be-



Young prisoners accompany a Mission brahmachari as he sings at a function in Malda jail

tween themselves. For us jail officials who have spent most of our service life with them behind high walls and iron gates, it is not unusual to see them sad at having to leave their companions at the time of their release.

Since we get almost no feedback

from our former wards, we have no way of measuring the success of our endeavours. But it can be said emphatically that mere punishment is no solution to the problem of crime. So we must press ahead with reformatory measures and try to change the minds of criminals. Above all, socio-economic problems need to be tackled before crime can be effectively checked. This is especially true for the developing countries of South-East Asia and Africa, a great majority of whose population is still under-educated and agricultural. *



Magnanimity

Sri Biswanath Chowdhury, Minister for Prisons, Government of West Bengal, is all smiles as he watches convict J Ramaswami of Alipore Central Correctional Home donating his entire prison wages of Rs 4,500 to vegetable seller Sri Nemai Baidya for the continuance of his highly meritorious daughter Iti Baidya's MBBS study at a moving ceremony at the state secretariat. Being inspired by this act other inmates of the Alipore correctional home also donated a total of Rs 30,000.

It is an accepted fact that for many prisoners the worst pressures arise not from the prison authorities but from fellow prisoners, particularly in overcrowded institutions with limited supervision. Criminologists have claimed that there exists a *prison subculture*, standing in opposition to official prison hierarchy and forcing the inmates to comply with an informal code, if necessary through threats and violence. Acts like the one above, however, demonstrate how higher values of benevolence and social concern can not only permeate the prison environment but also serve as inspiration to the outside world.

Reclaiming Life

DR SANAT KUMAR BANERJEE

A Novel Experience

Gouranga Das, the skeletal octogenarian—with thinning long white hair tied in a bun and a long white beard—stood up after a little hesitation and, holding the microphone, sang a charming *baul* song and a bhajan on Krishna in a high-pitched voice. After many requests, Rahamat Piada, a burly man of noble appearance, came up and sang a ghazal: ‘*Sakaler madhye Muhammad*; Muhammad is in the midst of all’. Everybody in the audience applauded. Picking up courage, another person volunteered to sing a popular song of Rabindranath Tagore’s. And here was a voice as sweet and melodious as any recorded professionally. More songs followed. Tears rolled down the cheeks of some as they sang. A great enthusiasm was noticed. The group, numbering about one hundred and fifty, sat quietly for two hours and listened eagerly to the discourse on values delivered by Swami Divyanandaji, a monk of the Ramakrishna Order, and readings from the book *Sabar Swamiji* (Swami Vivekananda for All).

Sitting through the programme, I felt a bit depressed as I silently observed these people—of varying ages and diverse social status—sitting in ordered rows on mats spread out on the ground in front of us. Except a few, most of them had a look we usually associate with the poor and the deprived. Young adults and teenagers outnumbered the middle aged and the elderly. The group appeared unclean—unbathed, unshaven and shabbily dressed. They had many identities. They were fathers, brothers and sons in their families; murderers, thieves, dacoits, gamblers and rapists in society; criminals in the eyes of law. But, above all, they were *human beings*. They were all now living together far

from their homes in a place well-known to others as Alipore Central Jail. Yes, they are all prisoners—some are under trial and others are convicts. Prisons have now been renamed *correctional homes* and the prisoners are called *inmates* of the correctional homes—a re-formation of vocabulary that is easier accomplished than the transformation of lives that it aims to bring about.

I was attending this programme of 26 March 2005 as an invitee, along with several others. This two-hour correctional programme had been initiated by Swami Divyanandaji on behalf of the Ramakrishna Mission and was being organized by the Ramakrishna Vivekananda Seva Sangha, Ichhapur, West Bengal, with the voluntary participation of a few kind-hearted retired persons. There were also honoured guests like the Inspector General of Police (Prisons) and the Secretary, Ministry of Prisons, Government of West Bengal. I vividly remember how those captive brothers offered their pranams to all of us and how some of them embraced us. A good many of them eagerly asked the organizers for the date of the next programme. The experience of that morning left a deep impression on my mind!



*Inmates of Howrah jail
get ready for a meeting*

Swami Vivekananda and the Sherborn Reformatory

Looking back on history we find an interesting passage in the famous letter of 20 August 1893 that Swami Vivekananda wrote to Alasinga Perumal from Breezy Meadows, Metcalf, Massachusetts:

Yesterday Mrs. Johnson, the lady superintendent of the women's prison, was here. They don't call it prison but reformatory here. It is the grandest thing I have seen in America. How the inmates are benevolently treated, how they are reformed and sent back as useful members of society; how grand, how beautiful, you must see to believe! And, oh, how my heart ached to think of what we think of the poor, the low, in India. They have no chance, no escape, no way to climb up. The poor, the low, the sinner in India have no friends, no help—they cannot rise, try however they may. They sink lower and lower every day, they feel the blows showered upon them by a cruel society, and they do not know whence the blow comes. They have forgotten that they too are men. ...¹

In her work *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, Marie Louise Burke mentions that Swamiji's visit to the women's prison was reported in the 'Personal' column of one Boston newspaper, *The Evening Transcript* of 23 August 1893: 'Swami Virckananda [*sic*] of India, a Brahmin monk who is on his way to the parliament of religions to be held at Chicago in September, is the guest of Miss Kate Sanborn at her "abandoned farm" in Metcalf, Mass. Last evening he addressed the inmates of Sherborn Reformatory for Women upon the manners, customs and mode of living in his country.'²

The reformatory Swamiji visited at Sherborn—a small, semi-rural town located about eighteen miles west of Boston—was called the Massachusetts Reformatory for Women. It was opened in 1877 with the hope of reforming women arrested and convicted repeatedly for minor offences against morality. Mrs Ellen Johnson took charge as superintendent from Clara Barton, the much-admired founder of the American branch of the Red

Cross, probably in the late 1880s. She continued in office till her death in 1899. She was involved in the reformatory movement since the American Civil War. By her innovative method of reformation she gained control over the inmates and won their obedience. She trained them in domestic skills that helped them get jobs in farms at the end of their sentences.³ That Swami Vivekananda was deeply impressed is clear from his mention of the reformatory as 'the grandest thing' he had seen in America. Burke, however, makes a nice counterpoint: 'Perhaps when Swamiji spoke before the inmates of the Sherborn Reformatory, they thought that *he* was the grandest thing *they* had seen in America. ... One cannot know, but the young Hindu monk, in his red robe and yellow turban, must have been like a sunburst in that dismal prison, and the effect in some cases may have been profound and truly transforming.'⁴

The Sherborn Reformatory, now known as Massachusetts Correctional Institution (MCI-Framingham), continued its reformation programme for a long time. But presently it has lost much of its innovative appeal and has turned into a simple prison.⁵

The term *reformatory* refers to correctional institutions for the detention, disciplining and training of young and first-time offenders. When Swamiji visited America there were a good number of reformatories in different states, of which the Elmira Reformatory of New York was reputed to be the first established. At present there are large numbers of reformatories functioning in the US, and many of them are more than a century old. The impressive records of their activities are now available on various websites.

The Spiritual Touch

All great religious teachers have been kind and sympathetic towards sinners. They have advised us to hate sin but not sinners. 'Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.' The dacoit Ratnakar was reformed into Rishi Valmiki. The transformation of Angulimala by

Bhagavan Buddha and of the two rogues Jagai and Madhai by Sri Chaitanya are well known. Jesus Christ prayed to God to pardon his killers—which included the Roman governor and his henchmen—even in his crucified state. The long-term effect of this act was the religious reformation of the entire Roman empire into a Christian state under the leadership of Constantine, three hundred years after the death of Jesus.

Swami Akhandananda (Gangadhar), a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, has narrated the story of the transformation of Manmatha, a ruffian, in his memoirs:

Once Sri Ramakrishna went to Yogin-ma's house at Nebubagan, Baghbazar. Hiralal, a brother of Yogin-ma's, did not like the fact that his sister went to Dakshineswar. We heard that when Yogin-ma invited the Master to her house, Hiralal brought a famous gymnast and wrestler named Manmatha, who lived in Gosainpara, to frighten him. After Manmatha saw the Master and heard a few words from him, he fell at his feet and said to him, weeping: 'My Lord, I am guilty. Please forgive me.' The Master replied: 'All right. Come one day to Dakshineswar.'⁶

According to Swami Akhandananda, Manmatha was a ruffian and an expert fighter. Some days later Manmatha asked Swami Akhandananda to accompany him to Dakshineswar to see the Master. Sri Ramakrishna blessed Manmatha, touching his body, and that touch transformed his life (ibid.). After Sri Ramakrishna's passing away, Manmatha once visited the monastery at Baranagore and '*Priyanath*, *Priyanath*; Beloved Master, Beloved Master ...' were all the words that he uttered during his stay there. Many years later Swami Akhandananda went to see him in his house and found him sitting in an ochre cloth, gazing at the sun in a deeply abstracted mood, his body emaciated by austerities.

Amjad was a notorious robber of the Jayrambati area who had been to jail several times. He frequently visited Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi at her house in Jayrambati and always received her favour and blessings. Once Amjad

brought some plantains as an offering for the Master. Mother gladly accepted them. A woman devotee tried to remind her of Amjad's antecedents. But Mother rebuked her saying, 'I know who is good and who is not.' She used to say, 'To err is human; but how few know how to lead an erring man!'

Holy Mother often said that she was the mother of the honest as well as the dishonest. She declared: 'If my son wallows in the mud, it is I who have to wipe all the dirt off his body and take him to my lap.'

Living Examples

Over the last three years, the Ramakrishna Mission has taken up several projects for the welfare of the inmates of various correctional homes. It is too early to judge the outcome of these services. Yet I mention some encouraging instances which I have personally seen or known and these may be considered preliminary results:

During Sri Ramakrishna's birthday celebrations at the Malda Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama in March 2005, I had occasion to witness the joy and hope in the faces of four released inmates when they received sewing machines and carpentry tools as aids to start their own trade. During their stay at the local correctional home they had received training in sewing and carpentry.

Akhtar and Mehmud, two rail robbers who participated in the correctional programme conducted by the above ashrama have jointly opened a barbershop in their native place, Bamungram Bazar, after their release from the Malda correctional home. They are now earning a decent living and are well accepted by their community.

Two inmates undergoing rigorous imprisonment at the Raiganj correctional home donated five hundred rupees each to a tsunami relief fund from their meagre jail earnings.

Shyamal, who is serving a life sentence at the Medinipur correctional home joined the celebrations at Mother's House in Bagbazar,

Kolkata, and also Sri Ramkrishna's birth anniversary celebrations at Belur Math, with special permission from the home authorities. He is a regular donor for Math activities and reads Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature avidly. He, along with five other life convicts, have recently become subscribers of *Udbodhan*, the Bengali monthly of the Ramakrishna Order.

The story of the transformation of P Murugan, a life convict at Cuddalore Jail, after reading the life and teachings of Sri Sarada Devi reads like a fable.⁷ His article 'My Experience with the Compassionate Mother' won the first prize in an essay-writing competition conducted by *Sri Ramakrishna Vijayam*, the Tamil monthly of the Ramakrishna Order, on the occasion of the 150th birth anniversary of Holy Mother. Murugan now serves as a teacher to his fellow convicts holding readings and classes on spiritual and scriptural themes.

On Sri Ramakrishna's birth anniversary in 2003, I got a chance to visit the correctional home in Malda town. That was my first-ever visit to any prison and I had no idea about the set-up inside and the nature of the inmates. I was naturally a bit excited. A small half-hour programme was held in a hall, where two inmates recited from memory some sayings of Sri Ramakrishna. All the inmates—numbering over two hundred—sat in neat rows and maintained strict silence. Thereafter prasad was distributed and the inmates took turns to receive the same in a disciplined manner. While I was

observing them the prison superintendent came to me and said, 'Well, Sir, how do you find them? If you had been here last year, you would have found them quarreling, fighting, and slanging with each other even during the programme. They were really extremely unruly. Now they are more disciplined and cooperative, and that is due to the Mission's work. We must continue this. They are now getting basic education and are being trained in sewing, carpentry and bookbinding, and things in the prison have become much easier for me now.'

A former inmate of the Sherborn Reformatory once wrote to Dr Miriam Van Waters, who had been superintendent of the reformatory from 1932 to 1957 about 'how I found *freedom* while imprisoned and how real freedom and real imprisonment are conditions within our self and not a matter of locks and keys'.⁸ Could there be a better definition of rehabilitation than this!

The Initiative and the Problems

Now I frequently join with my friends who organize the Friday programme at Alipore Central Correctional Home. The programme presently includes prayer and meditation, discourses on moral values and self-discipline, devotional songs and readings from Swamiji's biography. Some selected inmates are given training in computer applications separately and for this a special computer room has been established with the help of the authorities. A large number of books on Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature have been donated by Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Malda, to the library here. Some textbooks were provided to the few teenaged inmates who wished to prepare for the secondary school examinations.

Having visited the inmates for a few months I did find some changes in their behaviour. Some of the inmates regularly join the class and take part actively and voluntarily in the singing and readings. It was fascinating to see how quickly some of them



*Released prisoners of Malda jail
with their sewing machines*

picked up various tunes and organized choral singing of bhajans. During one of the sessions an inmate announced: 'Yes, we have committed some crimes and for that we deserve punishment. But we have every chance and hope of turning back for a better and healthy life, for which we must all try to change ourselves.' He was appreciated with claps from a large section of the audience, if not from the entire house.

Every programme has to confront problems. The major challenge to our efforts is the floating nature of the inmates. There are, on an average, around two thousand inmates at the Alipore home. Five hundred out of them are convicts, the rest are awaiting trial. Out of this large mass only fifty individuals, on average, attend our class. This number grows to a little more than a hundred on occasions. Every week a bunch of new faces are seen in the class while several old ones attending earlier classes disappear—maybe to attend trial at the courts or on transfer to other homes. Only a very small group attends regularly. The inmate management for this weekly programme is solely in the hands of the home officials. These officials have been very cooperative, but it would probably require a much greater involvement on their part than they are able to afford at present in order to ensure a greater stability in the composition of our classes.

A review of the the websites of several reformatories in the US reveals that the administrators there are solely responsible for planning and conducting the various correctional programmes. We in India are still far from achieving such equal-opportunity reformation programmes conducted by prison authorities.

One of the inmates, a Calcutta University graduate with a middle-class family background, who is a regular attendee at our Friday programme at Alipore, highlighted another problem. Some time back he told us that he would soon be released but was much perturbed thinking how his family, relatives and society would accept him. He also had no idea

how he was to rehabilitate himself. Another inmate, who is going to be released after twenty-six years of imprisonment expressed the same anxiety. We have as yet really no answer to these vital problems. We only sympathized with them and suggested that they keep in touch with any centre of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission for a more peaceful life.

So the real problem that our inmate brothers face once their prison terms are over is the lack of recognition and acceptance as normal members of society. The problem appears to be more acute for literate middle-class offenders than for their illiterate rural counterparts. There are other problems too. For instance, a former inmate of the Malda correctional home who once served a sentence for bus robbery, gets frequently arrested by the police on grounds of suspicion whenever there is any similar incident. Many a time innocent individuals become victims of circumstances and even end up as convicts. Such individuals are at times known to turn into hard-core criminals out of anger and hatred for society. This noble welfare effort of the Ramakrishna Mission can succeed only if it gets genuine and sympathetic support not only from the government but also from the people at large. *

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On Reformation of Prisoners

PROF. PRABHAS CHANDRA DHAR

The Traditional Prison

Prisons—places where rulers put their enemies and kept them in suffering—have been there since time immemorial. Many men and women have breathed their last languishing inside them. We have the oldest record of a prison in the Bhagavata. About five thousand years ago, King Kamsa put his sister Devaki and her husband Vasudeva in prison because he heard a voice tell him that Devaki's eighth child would kill him. We know how Kamsa killed Devaki's six children one after another and how Krishna killed him in the end. Kamsa was a tyrant who usurped the throne after putting his father Ugrasena in prison. In the Bible we find how Herod Antipas put John the Baptist in prison because John reproved the ruler for his incestuous living. Later John was beheaded and his head presented on a platter to Herodias. Gruesome details of torture in the prisons of France (for example the Bastille), Russia and many other lands are on record. In London one can see replicas of the engines of torture at Madame Tussaud's. The originals of these were actually used to persecute men and women at different times of history.

Generally speaking, prison is a place where people accused of committing crimes are kept during their trial in a court of law, and where they pass their days—for a period specified in the verdict—if found guilty. But numberless people have been sent to prison without even being tried, just because they happened to provoke the ire of those in power. Then there have been—and are, and will be—unfortunate souls in prison as a result of unfair trials. Innocent people may sometimes find themselves behind bars because of the machinations of wealthy criminals and dishonest lawyers. As in all spheres of human activity, even in the legal pro-

fession there are persons who are not always honest, and there are powerful criminals everywhere who strut around with impunity. Nobody dare open their mouth against these Devil's disciples, who often masquerade as philanthropists, saints and society's guardians. These are the most imperious ones, while the most unfortunate are those who weep silently inside prisons though they are innocent. A few years ago a Bengali film depicted the tale of an innocent man who is sentenced to life imprisonment on a false murder charge. His son becomes an advocate, manages to get a fair trial and secures his father's acquittal. In the meantime the man has already spent ten years in prison, and when he is released, he shouts, 'Give me back my ten years!' Episodes like this are not wholly imaginary. In Dante's *Divine Comedy* the classic example of prison is Hell. On the gates of Hell, Dante saw written: 'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.'

In this article we shall try to trace how the jail has changed from a place of torture to a reformatory, from a place where convicts abandoned all hope to one where hope is injected into them, where they are trained to enter the mainstream after their term, and from where they emerge as free men and women.

The Transformation of Convicts

In the April 2004 issue of the *Vedanta Kesari* there appeared an article, 'My Experience with the Compassionate Mother', written by one P Murugan. Sri Murugan, then twenty-five years old, was a life convict who had already spent eight years in Cuddalore Jail. He, his father and brother were all convicted for murder and sentenced to life imprisonment. Murugan entered hell, as it were, abandoning all hope forever. He was constantly persecuted by

thoughts of his mother and two sisters, who were now utterly helpless. At the nadir of depression, he thought the best way to get rid of it all was to commit suicide; that would end all his sufferings once for all. On the night of 18 January 2000, as he was lamenting over his sorrows, an inmate gave him a Tamil book, *Sri Sarada Devi: Vazhkaiyum Upadesangalum* (Sri Sarada Devi: Life and Teachings). But Murugan was in no mood to read anything then. Still, because he was literate, he opened the book and began to browse—till he came to a piece of advice: ‘Do not be afraid. Human birth is full of suffering. Hold on to the name of God and wade through the sufferings. Even the gods, holy men, avatars and saints will have to go through suffering if they take human birth. They have to go through physical and mental torture for others’ sake, to absolve others of their sins.’ The words acted like a lamp for Murugan. His heart, completely dark until then, was suddenly illuminated. His acute depression that was leading him to suicide disappeared in an effulgence of faith, courage and hope. At that moment he realized how insignificant his own suffering was in comparison with that of many others who were greater than him and even saintly. He would not be a coward; he was a brave man, and there was no reason for him to kill himself. An unimaginable metamorphosis came upon him through Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi’s magic touch. He started to chant the name of Sri Ramakrishna and slowly a sense of peace engulfed him, and he felt that he was surrounded by Mother’s grace and blessings.

Murugan became a changed man. He began his tapasya. For three years he prayed and read Holy Mother’s advice every day, and attained peace and tranquillity. ‘Service to man is worship of God’—this message he embraced wholeheartedly. He began to love everyone. Seeing that his fellow inmates were caught up in a whirlpool of mental problems like agony, suffering and depression, he decided to help them and give them some solace. From January 2001 he started classes for them on the Bhagavadgita,

Tiruvachakam (a Tamil scripture), and the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. In these classes he draws the attention of his listeners to certain crucial teachings. He says the most important among them is that famous saying of Holy Mother’s: ‘If you want peace, do not find fault with others. Rather see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; the whole world is your own.’ Murugan explains these ideas so passionately that many of his class are positively influenced by them. The jail authorities like him greatly and encourage him to ‘convert’ other inmates.

Sri Murugan’s transformation is an amazing story. A good book brought a man back from the edge of a precipice—from Hell to Heaven through Purgatory. And fortunately for prisons, this is not a lone instance; there are countless such examples. People like Murugan indeed change prisons.

Yet another incredible story appeared in the Kolkata edition of the *Hindustan Times* of 12 August 2005. Shibu Das was a neighbourhood ruffian who with his accomplices was fast growing into a major menace terrorizing people in his locality. But the magic touch of a good soul changed him altogether. As Sri Ramakrishna said, when two pieces of wood are rubbed together, fire comes out, and one can cook rice over the fire. Shibu Das is now an art teacher at Ramakrishna Mission Saradapith’s Janashiksha Mandir in Belur, Howrah. He is happy training budding artists and has painted beautiful murals of Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi, Vivekananda and Jesus Christ. He has become genuinely interested in religion and has even had mantra diksha from the President of the Ramakrishna Order.

Rightly did Richard Lovelace (1618-58) write:

Stone walls do not a prison make
Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for a hermitage.¹

True, we have heard of people turning into saints when they were put in jail. The first name that comes to mind is of Sri Aurobindo. His prison term proved a godsend for him. His genius found the right direction in solitude and he became a rishi. Unfortunately, people like Aurobindo are rare; the larger humanity is ordinary, mediocre and vulgar. They love not love; they love power, pelf and pleasure. In Sri Ramakrishna's words, they are like vultures that soar high in the air but have their eyes on the carrion down below. Yet, though few, there have been great people like Wordsworth's Skylark:

Type of the wise who soar but never roam—
True to the kindred points of heaven and
Home.

Almost unbelievably Murugan was delivered from the bottom of the pit of distress by the compassionate Mother. Every earthly hope had been erased from his mind; so he was fully receptive to her words of advice and was thus a true receptacle of her grace. It is about such people that Krishna proclaims in the Gita: *Teṣāmaham samuddhartā mrtyusaṃsāra-sāgarāt; Bhavāmi nacirātpārtha mayyāveśita-cetasām*; For them whose minds are thus absorbed in Me, I become before long, O Partha, the Saviour from the death-fraught ocean of the world.' Murugan is now a good teacher in Cuddalore Jail and has been trying to deliver others from anguish, desperation and despondency.

The Modern Indian Prison

What is the condition inside Indian jails today? What is the relationship between prisoners and prison authorities? We talked to some officials of the Central Jail, Agartala, and they answered our questions enthusiastically, even volunteering some extra information. According to them, our harangue on the torture of convicts was outdated. Jail officials, they said, are only custodians of certain people who are either accused of some offence, or are undergoing trial, or have been convicted and sent to jail for

a certain period of time. The custodians keep their wards strictly according to a charter and have nothing to do with their punishment, leave alone torture. Those on simple imprisonment have no work to do. Those on rigorous imprisonment are only asked to work according to the rules. When the work is strenuous they work for six hours a day, otherwise they work for seven hours. Prisoners earn money—though very little—as they work, which they can send to their families if they wish. Their diet is also regulated by the charter. Jails are inspected regularly by members or deputies of the National Human Rights Commission or by court judges.

At least in Tripura, there has been no complaint in the matter of upkeep of jails ever since the state joined the Indian republic in 1949. Jail authorities there say that in addition to maintaining strict discipline and security inside the jails, different reformatory and correctional programmes are also implemented for the inmates. (We had a discouraging experience, though. We requested the authorities to permit us to meet some selected prisoners once a week for an hour or so. We intended to talk to them about the Bhagavadgita, Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi with a view to mitigating their mental distress. However, our request has remained under 'active consideration' for many months now! The officials who spoke to us so candidly were even unwilling to let us name them in this article. 'Who knows when the higher-ups will be displeased!' they whispered. We understand their predicament, of course.)

Prison Reforms

But how have these changes come about? Throwing the convict into a dungeon or a solitary cell was common. In John Galsworthy's play *Justice*, the priest who comes to the prisoners to tell them about God is of the opinion that they ought to be kept in such conditions, for they were willing to hear of God only then! When this used to be the state of things, what caused people to realize that convicts are also

human beings, that they committed their first crime by sheer accident? The inhuman treatment meted out to them in prisons only hardened them and they turned into habitual criminals over time. But the situation has changed today. How did it happen? What miracle caused it? When we ponder over these things we find that the change in people's outlook occurred silently and steadily. It took years and centuries for them to outgrow the tendency to be persecutory and vindictive and become tolerant and compassionate. From being thought a brute the convict has come to be regarded as a human being. That is wonderful!

We Indians had been under foreign rule for more than a millennium till we became independent in 1947. During the early period of this long bondage, the rulers did not believe in trials and prisons. When they suspected somebody of an offence they summarily put the person to death. Over time, such short-cuts were discarded and the accused were tried before being punished. Even then judges were so zealous that they always looked for something in the case that would justify the severest punishment. According to them, the best way to control crime was to eliminate criminals! Slowly—very slowly—this cruel intent was replaced by an attitude of kindness. However, old attitudes still persist in many places.

An elaborate judicial system was put in place only during the British Raj, and a world of change came about with its basic principle of giving the accused 'the benefit of the doubt'. A whole generation of educated people pursued the legal profession and emerged from institu-

tions donning black coats of different styles. Lengthy procedures for preparing complaints and charge-sheets and for presenting witnesses, long-drawn court proceedings—and all the associated chicanery—crept into the legal world, adding much glitter to the gorgeous Raj.

Much of these remain even today, though more than half a century has passed since we became independent, democratic and 'eclectic'! Many accused rot in our prisons for up to fifteen years before they face even a semblance of a trial. Civil cases often lie in court shelves for fifty years before they are heard, if ever. More than one law is passed in the legislatures of this country every day, but we see very little change that is really welcome.

Surprisingly, prisons, though an integral part of the overall judicial system, are witnessing changes for the better, thanks to the vigilance of the Human Rights Commission, concern of honourable judges, good intentions of the central and state governments, and the influence of humanitarian and philanthropic organizations. Many jails are now called 'correctional homes', and the living conditions therein have greatly improved. Inmates are given

basic education and taught vocational skills like weaving, sewing, welding, carpentry, printing, automobile repair and horticulture. This is indeed praiseworthy. Prison authorities desire to see their wards go out into the world after their terms and live with honour and dignity, and not return to crime. Many times the authorities themselves help them find jobs and earn a decent living, and often they are successful. The notion 'once in jail, always in jail' is no longer axiomatic. It is good that a man is not regarded



The Deputy Inspector General of Police giving away sports prizes at Malda jail

as an ex-convict but just as a common man. We ought to rejoice at these changes.

Today we are being threatened by terrorists who believe—and they do not hide their belief—that they will reshape the world with their guns and suicide squads. The number of these ambassadors of violence is not big; greater is the number of two-faced hypocrites who condemn the terrorists in public and thrive on profits from illegal sale of arms and weapons of mass destruction to them. Western nations never really worried when dastardly terrorist acts were perpetrated in other countries, but now that bombs are exploding in their own lands, they have begun to shout. However, clandestine arms sales have not stopped. That these things affect society is evident. What is not so evident is that their effect is felt inside prisons too.

But we need not lose hope. While the furious flames of hatred rise higher every day and seem to engulf humanity, the soothing shower of love has also been falling without break, though silently. And love is certainly more powerful than hatred. This superior love, compassion, is born in great hearts. It envelops the whole of human society and percolates even through the thick walls of the prison, as if osmotically. These noble souls pray: '*Sarve bhavantu sukhinah sarve santu nirāmayāḥ; Sarve bhadrāṇi paśyantu mā kaścit duḥkhabhāḥ bhavet.* May all be happy, may all enjoy good health; may all see good things, may none experience sorrow.'

The Tradition of Service in the Ramakrishna Order

While mutual hatred rent the European nations after the fall of Constantinople, India was swept by a wave of divine love, bhakti. Even when the British let loose a reign of terror, Indians found the idea of non-violence stronger than notions like 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'. Such ideas permeated every area of Indian society, including jails, where soldiers of the freedom struggle often outnumbered common criminals. These freedom fighters awed

and overwhelmed convicts and jail officials with their magnanimous character and kind behaviour.

As to the outside world, the work of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda and others like them was slowly changing the atmosphere. They did not command others to 'love thy neighbour', nor did they advise, 'Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.' People heard and forgot such instructions; they never obeyed them. More than eighteen centuries after the Sermon on the Mount was delivered, Sri Ramakrishna scoffed at the idea of man showing compassion to fellow men. 'Who are you to show compassion?' he questioned. 'No, it cannot be. Not compassion for others, but rather the service of humans, recognizing them to be veritable manifestations of God.' This is the doctrine of *śiva jñāne jīva sevā*. Now the whole paradigm changed.

Artists, when they paint portraits of gods and saints, often depict a halo around their heads. But they cannot show the compassion exuding from them—compassion that envelops everyone and everything that happens to be inside its ambit. Like the sunlight that falls on all equally, the compassion of great souls influences human hearts everywhere, even inside prisons—and there prisoners and jailers alike.

It is worthwhile to recount here some episodes in the lives of Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi and Vivekananda to see their love, compassion and sympathy for others. Their influence, we believe, has brought about a profound change in human affairs.

Once Sri Ramakrishna went on a pilgrimage to northern India with Mathuranath Biswas. On the way they halted at Baidyanath. When passing through a neighbouring village, Sri Ramakrishna was greatly distressed to see the wretched condition of its poor and starving inhabitants. Moved with sympathy for them, he asked Mathur to feed the people and give each a piece of cloth. When Mathur demurred saying that the added expense would leave them

short of funds on the journey, Sri Ramakrishna declared that he would not continue with the pilgrimage until the villagers were all fed and clothed. He would not go to see gods of stone as long as living gods remained starving. Mathur had to yield.

Again, when two boatmen quarrelled and one hit the other, Sri Ramakrishna cried out in pain and his back actually became red and swollen! Such was his identification with all beings.

Sarada Devi was an embodiment of sympathy and compassion. Once she said to Girishchandra Ghosh, 'I am your real mother, not just the wife of your guru, nor an adopted mother, nor just a mother to call as such—your real mother.' Her selfless service of others has no match in the annals of human history. One hundred and twenty-five years ago, when our society was rife with practices like untouchability, religious superstitions and customs inimical to women, she stood out as a figure of extraordinary courage and sagacity. Once when Holy Mother was in Calcutta a woman of ill repute began to visit her. One of Mother's attendants advised her not to entertain the woman since it offended other women devotees who came from respectable families. But Mother said she would not stop the woman from visiting her; if that prevented others from coming, she could not help it.

It reminds us of a similar story in the New Testament:

And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners? But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.²

Amjad was a well-known dacoit, but even he was not deprived of Holy Mother's love and affection. Whenever he came to her he was received like a son. Once after feeding him herself Mother even cleaned the place—something unimaginable for a Hindu brahmin woman of

the time. When her niece objected to it, Mother said, 'Keep quiet, Amjad is as much my son as Sharat is.' Sharat was none other than Swami Saradananda, a monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna! Such was her universal compassion. One may also remember how, many years earlier, a ferocious robber was won over when young Sarada addressed him as 'Father' as soon as she encountered him at the dead of night in the wilderness of Telobhelo. It had acted as a magical incantation and melted the robber's stony heart. He too visited his 'daughter' more than once at Dakshineswar.

Neither the passage of time nor the stout walls of the prison have been able to block Holy Mother's love. It has penetrated both to work wonders in lives that were supposedly lost.

Swami Vivekananda was love and wisdom personified, in whom bhakti and jnana combined in equal proportion. Whatever he did and wherever he was, his deep concern for our less fortunate brethren was always in the forefront. In one of his letters, addressed to Alasinga Perumal, he describes his visit to an American 'reformatory'. His appreciation of the attempts in the American reformatory to get convicts to join the mainstream of society as useful members and his deep regret at the ill-treatment of the marginalized sections of our own society is deeply insightful.³ One sees in that letter the depth of Swamiji's love and compassion for the fallen.

Rightly does Shakespeare say: 'The quality of mercy is not strain'd; it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath.' Such divine mercy has created silent but noticeable ripples even in the most unexpected places, like prisons, perceptibly changing the hearts of all concerned.

Following in their footsteps, the Ramakrishna Mission is performing works of love and charity on an extensive scale. Its monks are ever prepared to extend their helping hands whenever and wherever people are in distress. When Swami Vivekananda felt constrained by lack of funds during the Calcutta plague relief work in



Rabindra-Nazrul Jayanti at Malda jail

1899, he was ready to sell the Belur Math property to overcome the difficulty. Such willing self-sacrifice can still be seen in the deeds of the Ramakrishna Mission. We outsiders do not have a complete picture of all the commendable work that the monks are doing; we only get to know a few things from published reports or hearsay.

I wish to record here the good work initiated by just one monk—Swami Divyanandaji, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Malda. Some years back, the campaign for blood donation that he helped popularize in Agartala greatly changed the local people's attitude towards voluntary blood donation. Now the fear associated with blood donation has significantly decreased. Once when he noticed a small girl in a crowd who had a tumour in her foot which made walking difficult, he approached her mother offering to help. He got the child surgically treated, arranged for post-operative care, and helped her until she became normal. Recently, he reclaimed from the police two youths who had become purse snatchers and pickpockets. The swami had them provided with a fully furnished hair-dressing salon and thus rehabilitated them. Of late, Swami Divyanandaji has been meeting inmates in West Bengal jails and giving them emotional and moral support. He brings to them the life-giving message of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Vedanta. The hearts of the inmates are now full of hope and they take ac-

tive interest in learning useful skills like reading and writing, painting, and public speaking. They also organize cultural festivals like Rabindra Jayanti and Nazrul Jayanti.

All that is inside the prisons, some may argue; conditions outside are worsening at a rapid pace. But then, even the best cultivated land is sometimes overgrown with weeds. And just as the farmer cleans them up, the missionary monks of the Ramakrishna Order are preparing the social soil and sowing the seeds of benevolence.

Nowadays certain prisoners are given the choice of open jails where there is just the minimum of restrictions on their movements and activities and where they can live with their family members. These open jails are a good halfway house between the high-walled prison and the open society. Here inmates enjoy all ordinary facilities except socializing with the outside world.

In Conclusion

This is the history of Indian jails. It is amazing to see how they have evolved from houses of torture to homes of reform. However, the change that can be seen inside jails is collateral with the marked attitudinal changes that have taken place in the outside society. The pace of progress within prisons could have been much faster if the activities of certain humanitarian agencies outside the prison premises were more catholic. It is sad that many organizations are genuinely benevolent only to the followers of their own creed or ideology. Fortunately, the Ramakrishna Mission appears to be an exception in this regard. For its monks 'the quality of mercy is not strain'd'. *

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Biotechnology and Human Dignity

PROF. AMALENDU CHAKRABORTY

Introduction

Humans have won their dominant position on this planet by their command of technology. Other animals have to take nature as they find her; they must fit into the environment that she provides as best as they can. We humans alone can change the shape of the world. We can move things about, alter them in our effort to create an environment more hospitable than that which nature has thrust us into. Technology is the sum total of all the techniques by which human beings change their environment. To be precise, technology is characteristic of all human societies, and it exists even among the less developed tribes and communities. Even the Eskimos use a number of techniques to make life comfortable for themselves. More advanced civilizations have more complex technologies, but the basic pattern is always the same.

Now, all progress in technology depends on a scientific understanding of the way in which nature works, in order that we make her work for our ends. Pure science and technology are not independent fields of study. Agriculture cannot prosper without the study of genetics, light metals cannot be made without research in chemistry, and automation depends on electronic devices that need a detailed understanding of the physics of matter and of the logic of control systems.

Towards the end of the last century biotechnology came into the limelight. The word *biotechnology* implies the concept of technological approach and assistance for the fulfilment of the biological needs of human individuals in society for a better future and a longer life. It is an ongoing multidimensional revolution with far-reaching social, political, economic and cultural ramifications and even devastating philo-

sophical and ethical implications. Presently, there is an explosion of biotechnological research aiming at exposing the secrets of our mind, the mysteries of our body, the intricacies of our behaviour—in fact, the innermost intimacies of the multicomplex psychosomatic continuum of human personality. In its essence, origin, development and scope, it is our most sustained, rigorous and revolutionary effort at self-interrogation, self-analysis and self-understanding. In brief, we are trying to open up all the secrets of the origin of life by deciphering the very code of biological existence in all its glory and resplendence.

Basic Questions

One may put forward the following questions with regard to biotechnology and its role in the development of human dignity in our present society. What is biotechnology? What are the roles that biotechnology plays for the fulfilment of the biological needs of individuals? Does biotechnology have any positive role in the establishment of human dignity in our society? These are some of the problems I have tried to explore in this article.

The Concept of Human Dignity

Before we pinpoint the possible avenues through which we can try to understand the miraculous development of biotechnology in recent years, we must try to define the nature of 'human dignity' with some care and caution. In the ancient world, where feverish human fertility had outrun the patient bounty of the soil, and the soul was broken with hardship, the primitive belief in the power of the will seemed to disappear from religion as well as from philosophy; happiness was conceived as the cessation of desire and the bliss of surrendered per-

sonality. In those seething cauldrons of humanity, the individual could have no fundamental value or significance. But in active and progressive civilizations, the individual finds greater reason for believing in his own creative personality; he feels in himself a spark of spontaneity. Freedom is the first condition for the flowering of this individual creativity. And with freedom comes its limitations. For life is an equilibrium of mutually interfering loci of power. Human beings are so diverse in terms of capacity and courage that without restraints their natural differences would breed and multiply through a thousand artificial inequalities into a stagnant and hopelessly stratified humankind. The French loved Napoleon because, despite his despotism, he kept careers open for all talents, wherever born, and gave men in unprecedented abundance that equality which timid souls love a little more than freedom.

But people can be termed free only when they enjoy equality in terms of capacity and power; and yet, paradoxically, this equality is destroyed by freedom. For equality is an unstable relation; it decreases as organization and complexity grow. The very nature of social evolution involves increasing inequality because it specializes functions, differentiates abilities, and makes humans unequally valuable to society. 'Equality is only a transition between two hierarchies, just as liberty is only a passage between two disciplines', wrote G Tarde in his *Laws of Imitation* at the beginning of the last century. Of what use can equality in ballots be when power is so unevenly distributed and political decisions must obey the majority of dollars rather than the majority of men and women? This disappearance of economic equality and freedom is the deepest root of our political hypocrisy and decay. But man is primarily an emotional animal, occasionally rational; and through his feelings he can be deceived to his heart's content.

Advancements in Biotechnology

It is against the background of this inher-

ent sense of human freedom, equality and dignity (in spite of all the above-mentioned drawbacks) that we are to judge the recent advancements in biotechnology. By revealing the secrets of mind and body, it is providing vital therapeutic inputs to physicians and surgeons with a view to curing hitherto incurable diseases. More importantly, biotechnological procedures are being applied in the early detection of various diseases, thus facilitating preventive measures. The genetic dynamics of ageing are being probed with a view to postponing ageing. Acutely distressful mental and behavioural disorders are being treated and controlled by requisite biotechnological interventions. Bacteria and viruses are being harnessed to produce new chemicals, medicines, and foods. Agricultural and industrial sectors are being quantitatively expanded and qualitatively enriched by means of biotechnological advances.

The vertical depth and horizontal sweep of biotechnological experimentation is awe-inspiring and at times frightening. The speed with which biotechnological choices are made and implemented raises compelling bioethical issues. Furthermore, it makes an approximate evaluation of possible ethical implications of biotechnology an almost impossible task. The probable implications of ongoing biotechnological advances cannot be predicted in advance. So the problems of a biotechnologically oriented, directed and dictated world will be many in the decades to come.

Possibilities and Problems

At present, we are already in the thick of the mind-boggling impact of biotechnological experimentation. The application of physical and chemical means of contraception have been received with great pride throughout the world for the success they have helped achieve in population control. With the breakdown of the joint family in most Indian societies, young couples are unwilling to have more than one or two children. Many married women working in corporate sectors are even reluctant to have a

single child for fear of loss of their figures. Again, some couples are living together and enjoying their sex life without going through marriage. With the development of contraception and new reproductive technology, the possibility exists for the first time of breaking natural biological links and freeing women from the reproductive role. Many people see artificial reproduction outside the womb as the future basis of women's liberation. This is a kind of freedom undreamt of by earlier generations.

However, the real choices available to women are also constrained by economic, social and political circumstances and by prevailing ideologies and moralities, and in patriarchal societies new developments are more likely to be used to control rather than to liberate women; they are also particularly likely to be abused in relation to poor, black or Third World women, who may face forced sterilization or be the unwilling guinea pigs for contraceptive experiments.

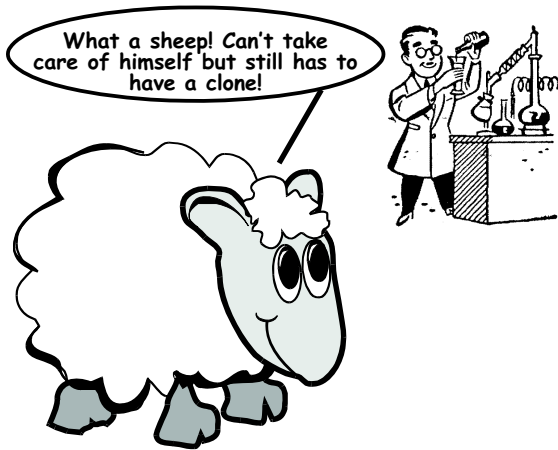
Therefore, although feminists have increasingly come to see free access to contraception and abortion as key feminist demands, some have also come to understand their potential dangers, arguing that they can endanger women's health and lead to an increase in sexual exploitation, and that they may be used to limit the reproductive capacities of women deemed 'unfit' to become mothers (blacks, the poor, the single, lesbians and the mentally abnormal).

Similarly, though modern medicine can greatly reduce the risks involved in pregnancy and childbirth, it can also become unnecessarily interventionist and involve a transfer of power from female friends, relations and midwives to male doctors, while the mother herself may be unable to participate actively in the birth of her own child. Recent developments in reproductive technology have also been used against women to consolidate male power and make patriarchy for the first time absolute. R Arditti wrote in *Test-Tube Women*: 'Here is man's control of the awesome power of woman; the last stronghold of nature which he can finally domi-

nate.' The outcome of such a struggle is crucially important, but it cannot be simply determined, for it is tied to power relations elsewhere. Reproductive technology raises profound questions about motherhood—about the importance of genetic and gestational links to the children one rears. It also raises alarming questions about power—about who controls reproduction in societies such as ours. The main problem, of course, is to determine precisely what it is about reproduction and mothering that is, from women's point of view, both power-giving and pleasure-giving. Whatever the difficulties that may accompany this search, the woman who completes it successfully is unlikely to be disappointed. Rather, she is likely to discover why it is that she wants to mother—and how much.

Other important and controversial areas include sex change by the application of biotechnological instruments and surgery, hormone therapy for biological modification of physiology and behaviour, and the use of cloning for the purpose of altering the genetic evolution of humans. Now, can human cloning ever be justified? Most of the scientists prefer to provoke rather than pronounce. Let us imagine a highly educated couple in their forties, driving along with a twelve-month-old daughter in the back seat. The mother is a top reproductive scientist and the father a highly respected atheist. The car crashes and the baby dies. They take a sample of the child's tissue in the hope of cloning her. Given their ages, a clone is the nearest hope they have of having a child of their own. But when they do manage to rear a clone, they realize that genes are not the whole story, and that the clone will never be identical to the child they have lost.

There is a great divide, even in the science community, about what is normally acceptable. Dr Severino Antinori, the controversial Italian scientist, who was among the first to publicize their plans to clone a human being, came in for much opprobrium from the public and from other fertility specialists. But he was



hailed as a hero by infertile couples desperate to have a baby that is genetically related to them. I believe that it is the duty of researchers to let people know what is possible, and then to let society decide whether those possibilities should be turned into reality.

However, we do not want scientists to be oblivious to the consequences of their research. Many funding councils require scientists to outline the benefits and value of their work to society and they do not need a PhD in moral philosophy to do that. As Prof. Reiss, a professional ethicist, says, 'it is not our job to arbitrate on whether we should clone, but to think of new ways to approach the debate'. He compares himself to a travel agent, who does not decide which country customers visit but helps them to come to a decision.

Last but not the least, the theoretical threat of bio-terrorism has become a chilling reality in the new post-9/11 world. A string of anthrax exposures in the US not only stirred up public worries across the world over bio-terrorism, but also fuelled demands for medicine, equipment and technology that could prevent

or help respond to biological or chemical attacks.

But there is a strong feeling that the biotechnological industry could play a key role in national security and thus there is some rethinking in the biotechnology and defence communities about a closer interaction in the future. Over the last few years the governments of various nations have boosted their military spending in response to the threat of terrorism. So in the present context why and how we shall welcome or bid goodbye to the biotechnological progress all around the globe is a highly debatable issue.

Conclusion

One can hardly deny the contribution of biotechnology to the betterment of human life and the sentiments attached to these advancements across the globe. But, like all knowledge, it can be applied for good or for evil—and even when applied with the best of intentions, it can have evil results. In brief, every human advance carries with it not only automatic benefits but also a new responsibility; and we must remain vigilant about the dangers that lie in the possible misuse of our enormous skills. I personally believe that no amount of modernity can change the basic human virtues. Maybe, we sometimes forget the basic truths of our life, thereby allowing ourselves to be submerged in the scientific whirlpool. But humans, being the best creation of the Lord, must not forget that good life—both material and spiritual—should not be sacrificed for jingoism. The sooner this is understood, the better it is for the survival of human values and virtues. *

Human dignity is the recognition that human beings are worthy of a particular level of esteem or respect simply because they are human beings. ... each and every human being has equal, inestimable, and irreducible dignity. It is not bestowed and it cannot be taken away; rather, it is recognized.

Connecting the recognition of human dignity to specific issues such as cloning, stem cell research, resource allocation, euthanasia, and the like is the bioethical task. This task requires reflection, interpretation, translation, and application.

—Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity

Understanding Vivekananda

SWAMI SANDARSHANANANDA

(Continued from the previous issue)

Vivekananda-Ramakrishna-Kali

To Sri Ramakrishna, everything he perceived and performed was Kali's Divine Play. Hence She was the most palpable phenomenon in his day-to-day life. The needed attitude of a spiritual aspirant as put down philosophically by Dr S Radhakrishnan closely matches Sri Ramakrishna's attitude: 'The antithesis between what we wish to be and what we are is implicitly their unity. The divine consciousness and will must become our consciousness and will. ... We must give up our particular will, die to our ego, by surrendering its whole nature, its consciousness, and character to the Divine.'⁸ This perpetual extraordinary vision marks the course of Ramakrishna's contributions to human society. He had chosen Vivekananda, who possessed the spiritual mettle he was in search of, as his chief aide. Therefore it was not difficult for him to pass the inheritance on to Vivekananda. Vivekananda solemnly received the germ of this burden and developed the space needed for its full manifestation. Having been commissioned by his master for the accomplishment of this task, he adequately educated himself through close interaction with people from all walks of life and diverse cross-sections of society. The whole process was summed up beautifully when he said that Sri Ramakrishna was "like a flower", living apart in the garden of a temple, simple, half-naked, orthodox, the ideal of the old time in India, suddenly burst into bloom in a world that had thought to dismiss its very memory.'⁹

Sri Ramakrishna put himself in the middle, as it were, with Mother Kali and Vivekananda on either side, and forged an intimate kinship between the two. Resorting to them, he

was as if gliding at will between heaven and earth. The three mingled into a paradoxical unity, unprecedented in the history of hagiography. Kali the 'phenomenon' was covertly operating in Vivekananda's person in the guise of Ramakrishna, who became the repository as well as the regulator of this power. Sri Ramakrishna avowedly withheld the 'key' to this secret in his own heart for it to be unlocked at an appropriate time. And that came to pass shortly before Vivekananda's passing. The process really started from that glorious moment of his remarkable spiritual experience at Kshir Bhawani when, in the exuberance of his love and devotion to the Divine Mother, he was nursing the desire of protecting Her temples from desecration by Islamic invaders. But he suddenly heard Her admonishing voice saying: 'What, even if unbelievers should enter My temples, and defile my images! What is that to you? Do you protect Me? Or do I protect you?' (128). An immediate result was the instantaneous transformation of his attitude and conviction, in which he had listened to an inner voice say, 'I am only a little child.' It seemed to him that whatever he did till then to serve mankind was 'all fuss and vanity'. He declared that there should be no more such exercises for him; 'Now it's only "Mother, Mother!"' He was then in the grip of Kali and Her vision, trying to explore Her maya that has bewitched the world. In doing so, he brought forth 'Kali the Mother', a marvellous poetic obeisance to Her. His being was completely saturated with the concept of the child at its mother's knees, his behaviour exactly reflecting Ramakrishna's own dependence on the Divine Mother. The glory of God the Mother was clear to him even earlier. For he had taught: 'A

bit of Mother, a drop, was Krishna, another was Buddha, another was Christ.¹⁰ At Kshir Bhawani his knowledge reached its inevitable consummation.

Vivekananda's submission to his guru was total, his shraddha for him complete. So he harboured no confusion regarding discipleship. He could, accordingly, sing the glory of his guru in a full-throated voice:

What harm is there in some people worshipping their Guru when that Guru was hundred times more holy than even your historical prophets all taken together? If there is no harm in worshipping Christ, Krishna, or Buddha, why should there be any in worshipping this man [Ramakrishna] who never did or thought anything unholy, whose intellect only through intuition stands head and shoulders above all the other prophets, because they were all one-sided? It was he that brought first to the world this idea of truth, not *in* but *of* every religion, which is gaining ground all over the world, and that without the help of science or philosophy or any other acquirement (8.299).

He found Ramakrishna to be religion personified. So he was convinced that there was no need for one to be scholarly in order to be spiritual or religious. Learning had no connection with spiritual growth. The transmittal of spiritual energy by the touch of the guru quickened the heart of a disciple and initiated growth in a true sense. That was 'real baptism'.

Teacher Extraordinary

Sri Ramakrishna was of the opinion that the best teacher is like an expert physician. He would say:

Like the physicians, there are three types of religious teachers. The inferior teacher only gives instruction to the disciples but makes no inquiries about their progress. The mediocre teacher, for the good of the student, makes repeated efforts to bring the instruction home to him, begs him to assimilate it, and shows him love in many other ways. But there is a type of teacher who goes to the length of using force when he finds the student persistently unyielding; I call him the best teacher.¹¹

A true guru comes to live in the perfect disciple. Sri Ramakrishna could be visualized in Vivekananda. He was a hard taskmaster. Vivekananda too followed suit. Like the 'best teacher', he rigorously applied meditation, scriptural study and work in equal measure for the growth of his disciples. The stout-hearted recluse remained his ideal. He acutely felt the call of solitude off and on, and inspired his disciples to pursue such a living. He would say, 'What is there equal to meditation and the free life of a sannyasi?'¹² His affection for his disciples was boundless. He knew that, as their preceptor, he had to bear their responsibility. So he was ever vigilant and sometimes even harsh while training them. In the words of Swami Achalananda:

Swamiji was very strict about meditation and japa. ... Everyone was supposed to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning and meditate in the temple. ... He himself used to come regularly. ... In the beginning, if someone was absent, Swamiji would go to that person's room and call him: 'Hello, sannyasi babu, how long will you sleep?' He was so strict about meditation that he would not hesitate to punish the monks who were absent from the shrine. ... Till the end of his life Swamiji was very regular about his meditation, even when he was sick (287).

He expected a concurrence between work and spiritual practice. He wanted these intricately woven in their characters. His own behaviour was a demonstration of this. Having observed Swamiji from close quarters, Swami Kalyananda reminisced: 'It was truly a sight to see him meditate. He would become a statue carved out of stone, as it were! ... Ah! What a sight! Just as you see in the photograph; one hand placed over the other. Every morning he would sit in the shrine room and meditate for three to four hours at a stretch' (252). As he considered meditation and work essential, so he deemed scriptural knowledge important. He wanted that it should go hand in hand with the other two disciplines. He too kept up the habit of studying scriptures all through his life. Even a few hours before his demise, he was engaged in giving a long lesson on the Sanskrit grammar

of Panini to the monks at Belur Math. He inculcated the belief among them that such study forms an essential part of spiritual culture.

Spiritualizing Work

To Vivekananda this world is *karma bhumi*. Everyone comes here to work out his destiny, which need not necessarily be temporal. In fact it is the transcendental Reality for which all humans strive—knowingly or unknowingly. Vivekananda's attitude towards karma, though apparently at variance with that of Shankaracharya, ultimately coincides with the latter's viewpoint. Shankara held karma to be a stepping-stone to jnana, having no direct bearing on moksha or liberation. The work of a man established in jnana or knowledge of the Self could not be termed karma, he said, since he is shorn of the sense of agency. Shankara is for renunciation of karma as it multiplies ignorance giving rise to stronger bondage. But Vivekananda 'laid greater stress on renunciation in work than renunciation of work'. To him cultivation of the intrinsic spirit of renunciation is more important than extrinsic repudiation of work. He makes a free and pervasive application of work. The apparent difference between Shankara's and Vivekananda's views on karma is due to the difference in their temporal contexts and the different social conditions in which they lived. Shankara had to contend with *karmavadins* and re-establish the higher ideals of Vedanta over a millennium ago, when rites and rituals were gaining undue prominence. On the other hand, Vivekananda had to deal with the busy and complex nature of modern life. He observed that renunciation of work was impossible for modern man. So he provided a means for the spiritualization of work. He was able to give such a meaningful turn to karma since his thoughts were tuned to the catholic ideas of his guru. It set a trend that has reduced the above controversy about work to a non-issue. Swamiji's concept is to make use of work as worship, accepting creation itself as the Deity. His feelings in this respect would

sometimes break into verse:

From highest Brahman to the yonder worm,
And to the very minutest atom,
Everywhere is the same God, the All-Love;
Friend, offer mind, soul, body, at their feet.
These are His manifold forms before thee,
Rejecting them, where seekest thou for God?
Who loves all beings, without distinction,
He indeed is worshipping best his God.¹³

Swami Vivekananda wanted to restrain us from chasing the will-o'-the-wisp of happiness in this phenomenal world. Since there is no other alternative, he taught his followers to gain experience through the weal and woe of life and remain conscious of its ultimate futility. He proclaimed: 'Denial of the will to live, knowledge, and same-sightedness is the trinity of liberation' (8.344). Coming into contact with him, they would be imbued with his spirit of dispassion and resolve to face any hardships for their own spiritual fulfilment. For he would impress on them the fact that 'the road to the Good is the roughest and the steepest in the universe. It is a wonder that so many succeed, no wonder that so many fall. Character has to be established through a thousand stumbles' (8.383). The tremendous inspiration that they received from him goaded them on to work wonders. Their lives were examples of lofty dedication at the altar of God. There was no trace of materialism in their approach. They embodied the dictum pronounced by their guru: "A good world", "a happy world", and "social progress", are all terms equally intelligible with "hot ice" or "dark light". If it were good, it would not be the world. The soul foolishly thinks of manifesting the Infinite in finite matter, Intelligence through gross particles; but at last it finds out its error and tries to escape. This going-back is the beginning of religion, and its method, destruction of self, that is, love' (8.384).

Swami Vivekananda did not ignore *vyavaharika satta* (empirical reality) although his chief concern was with *paramarthika satta* (absolute Reality). He knew that realization of

the *paramarthika satta* did not come in a trice, without gaining experience of the *vyavaharika satta*. And the *vyavaharika satta* is not illusory in the sense of the *pratibhasika satta* (illusory appearance). The play of cause and effect persists in its realm, and does not cease until man is free of desire, ignorance and inequality—‘the trinity of bondage’. He laid emphasis on karma yoga with a view to breaking our inertia and prodding us into activity. We should be up and doing in our selfless work, for serving others thus we serve ourselves best spiritually, attenuating our *samskaras* that drag us down. His was the mantra of a dynamism which would take one beyond all dualities that manufacture the shackles of slavery.

Conclusion

Vivekananda discovered in his master ‘a searchlight of infinite power thrown upon the whole mass of Indian religious thought’ (7.483); and also one who never had a word of condemnation for anyone. But there is little to differentiate between the guru and the disciple. Vivekananda’s realization about Sri Ramakrishna was also his disciple Sister Nivedita’s perception about her master. She wrote: ‘I see in him the heir to spiritual discoveries and religious struggles of innumerable teachers and saints in the past of India and the world, and at the same time the pioneer and prophet of a new and future order of development.’¹⁴

To understand Vivekananda one has to first delve into the depths of his spiritual relationship with his guru. For that forms the root of his life, work and message. The force behind the man Vivekananda was one by sitting at whose feet ‘India can only rise’. The day Vivekananda heard about the greatness of service (*seva*) in comparison to compassion (*daya*) from Sri Ramakrishna’s lips, a sea change took place in his outlook. He became perfectly susceptible to Sri Ramakrishna’s message of service to man (*jiva*) as God (*Shiva*) and, eventually, gave shape to his work on this very foundation. He knew that real worship of God lay in serving

His active (human) forms rather than His passive images in temples and shrines. Therefore he gave us an earnest call: ‘Look upon every man, woman, and every one as God. You cannot help anyone, you can only serve: serve the children of the Lord, serve the Lord Himself, if you have the privilege. If the Lord grants that you can help any one of His children, blessed you are. ... Blessed you are that that privilege was given to you, when others had it not. Do it only as a worship.’¹⁵

By the grace of his master Swami Vivekananda was able to realize God the Immanent as well as God the Transcendent. So it had been permanently impressed upon him that everything in this phenomenal world was God in disguise. That is why, perhaps, he finally saw that any idea to serve Him in the indigent and the ignorant was absurd, for God alone knows the true purpose of having the less fortunate in His creation. Therefore he surrendered himself to the will of the Mother for good. Labelling Vivekananda with common appellations such as ‘reformer’ or ‘revivalist’ can be misleading because his contribution has unusual dimensions difficult to assess by any ordinary cut-and-dry standards. What he has done for humanity will never lose importance, notwithstanding the vicissitudes of history. In order to conceive this truth, we have to meditate deeply on his personality and his achievements. Unless we are able to catch Sri Ramakrishna resonating in him, we will never know his true identity. *

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Violated Divinity

It was Monday and I began the weekly jail rounds with my entourage. Moving from one ward to another we kept listening to all sorts of complaints from the prisoners. Someone's parental property had been appropriated by a rapacious landlord—redress was demanded; somebody had not heard from home for over six months—he wanted to know how his sick wife and helpless kids were doing; another had wanted to go to the hospital to get medicine for stomach ache, but the mate did not take him—he had said, 'First show me where it is aching, then we shall see.'

Having finished the boys' barracks our procession came to a stop in front of the female ward. A thin rope was hanging on the gate. A tug promptly resulted in the sweet sound of a bell inside. After a minute the female warder opened the gate and gave a salute. The squad of constables remained outside. Accompanied by senior officers I entered the ward. Instantly the matron barked: 'Escot Attenshun!'

Matron Giribala might have at some time been to a village school for a few months, slate in hand. 'Squad Attention!' was a bit of a mouthful for her. The jail, however, was none the worse for it. Its functioning was not hampered. The women prisoners became all alert and stood up all at once on hearing this familiar command, even though they understood nothing of its meaning. It was time now for 'complaints'. An elderly prisoner thrust forward a postcard.

'What do you want?' I asked her.

'Please have a look. My son is in great trouble. I have left him with another family. There is no one to look after him. You are my mother and father. If you permit, I can have him here with me. We shall share whatever food we get.'

'I have already told you that a seven- or eight-year-old boy cannot be permitted to stay in the jail; only children less than six may re-

main with their mothers.'

The woman spoke no more. She remained standing with head bent low. I could see tears streaming down the corners of her eyes as I quietly moved ahead.

A young girl was standing at the end of the file, sporting an air of indifference. If she had beauty, it was solely confined to her physical form. The vivacity that goes with beauty was conspicuous by its absence. The grace and sweetness associated with youth were hardly visible in her. A pair of tired eyes seemed embedded in a rough, hard face. She gave one the impression of a person who had not known kindness, companionship, love or affection. And if she had, they seemed to have been systematically eluted out of her person. She was like an unglazed stone image. She stared at me with empty eyes devoid of all curiosity.

'She came yesterday from the sessions court', said my assistant, the record-keeper.

'What is your name?' I asked.

It was a routine question, put to all newcomers. She held out her card rather casually, and said, 'Why don't you read it? Why only my name, you will get to know many other things.'

The officers accompanying me turned restive. They were not used to such arrogance from an ordinary prisoner. I also needed to 'take action' in order to maintain discipline. But I faltered. I took the card from her hand. Her name was Jnanada Mallik. The sessions judge had sentenced her to four years in prison for setting a house on fire. I looked at her face once more; she surely carried a much greater fire in her heart than the one she had lit with her hands. Nobody knew about it. The judge probably did not want to—or could not—know about it.

A wry smile passed over her thin lips as I handed back her card. She remarked sarcastically, 'Don't you want to know anything else?'

Why I set the house on fire? Whom I killed?’

I was not prepared for such questions. But I managed to hide my surprise and said, ‘Do you want to tell all that?’

‘What’s the harm? I have narrated that times without number; I have got it by heart. First it was to the gentlemen of the neighbourhood; then to the daroga, the lawyer, the junior judge, and finally to the judge himself. I have told them all. Not once, nor twice, but many times over. If you so wish, I can tell you too.’

I said, ‘I don’t want to hear. I have no need to know what you were or what you did. Let me also tell this to you—try and forget all that.’

I saw the sarcastic smile disappear from Jnanada’s lips. And I thought I saw a glimmer of surprise in her eyes. She had probably not expected this reply.

A few days later a copy of the judgement of the sessions court was sent to us. Jnanada had been asked—as is customary—if she would appeal to a higher court. She made no reply, except for an uncaring movement of her fingers. My deputy jailer, however, had her files brought over in case she changed her mind. The story that emerged from these records was on the usual lines:

Jnanada had been married at the age of fifteen. Her father had died long before. Her widowed mother had a bad name in the neighbourhood. When that news reached her in-laws, thanks to the neighbours, they refused to have her back at their place. Her husband soon settled down in a fresh matrimonial tie-up. Jnanada was still willing to wait, but the neighbours had other intentions.

The little land that the family had, had all but been sold up to meet the demands of Jnanada’s in-laws. The little that remained was not enough to provide for the sustenance of two individuals. The credit at the local grocer’s began to mount by the day till clearance of debt became an obvious impossibility. There was no end to the daughter’s worries, but the mother seemed unconcerned. Jnanada was not sure of the reason for her mother’s unconcern till the

day when the grocer’s son began demanding her company. Jnanada was furious, but the fury proved impotent when her mother came out in support of the grocer’s son.

Jnanada’s was a high-caste family. It was not possible for the low-born grocer’s son to have his way in the upper-caste neighbourhood. So Jnanada was forced to visit him at night at an isolated garden house.

The man, though a grocer, was apparently large-hearted. For soon he gathered a few friends to join him in the fun! Jnanada had had enough by then. She would not be forced into this orgy. The grocer too would not leave her alone. Coercion and harassment followed. The family’s subsistence became difficult, her mother was upset, but Jnanada remained unmoved.

Things reached a climax one winter night after both mother and daughter had spent two days without food. Jnanada sent word to the grocer’s son. ‘I’ll be going to the garden house tonight. Please come alone. Your friends may join you the night after.’ The grocer’s son was mighty pleased.

It was three in the night and Jnanada quietly stepped out of the room. She had with her a bottle of kerosene and a bunch of rags. She had carefully picked the matchbox from the grocer’s son’s pocket as he lay lost in deep slumber. She quietly locked the door from outside and then tossed in the burning bunch of rags.

As she saw the leaping flames, Jnanada was convinced that this was the very fire that she had been harbouring all these days in her heart. Today that fire was externalized and the conflagration within extinguished at long last. She stood back awhile to savour the scene.

She would have stayed on for some more time but her reverie was broken by violent screams, ‘Who is there! Save me!’ A wave of fear swept across Jnanada’s frame. She covered her ears with her palms and started running. By the time she reached home she had lost all outward consciousness.

(To be concluded)



Reviews



*For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA
publishers need to send two copies of their latest publications.*

Education for Human Unity and World Civilization. *Swami Nityaswarupananda.* Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Gol Park, Kolkata 700 029. E-mail: *rmic@vsnl.com*. 2003. xviii + 117 pp. Rs 50.

In her monumental biography (*Centred in Truth*) of Swami Nityaswarupananda (1899-1992) Shelley Brown writes: 'An extraordinary monk of the Ramakrishna Order, he expressed his profound spirituality as a practical "man of action" carrying out his visionary schemes with precision and resolution during a lifetime of hard work. A steady stream of seminal ideas and publications flowed from his prodigious capacity to learn, think, study and observe. Always looking for "the next step" he was the quintessential motivator on the brink of the new. To him, complacency was anathema, sloth the lowest spiritual state.'

This is, indeed, a quintessential description of the great swami's personality and his concrete achievements. Architect of the internationally reputed Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, the swami also planned the encyclopedic source books *The Cultural Heritage of India*. Moreover his rendering of the *Ashtavakra Samhita* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama) remains one of the few accessible translations of that seminal Vedantic text.

The present volume on education for human unity, subsuming and resting on the bases of world culture and spiritual unity, is a blueprint of what the swami visualized but, alas, could not implement. The primary impulse for the book came in response to the Unesco's Declaration of the Principles of International Cultural Cooperation (1966). At the instance of the Indian National Commission for Co-operation with Unesco the swami prepared a paper giving his 'comments on the implications of the Principles of the Declaration and the procedure for their implementation'. He presented it as a paper at a national seminar on this theme. The present book is an expansion of that paper.

The book maps out the complex theme in six

parts: 'India's Message to Herself and to the World'; 'Basic Principles of Education for Human Unity and World Civilization'; 'Culture for a New World'; 'The World Civilization Centre: An Outline of the Scheme of Education for Human Unity and World Civilization'; 'The World Civilization Centre in Relation to Unesco's Declaration of the Principles of International Cultural Cooperation' and finally 'The World Civilization Centre in Relation to India's Contribution to World Thought'.

Obviously, the swami was not a mere visionary but one who had a relentless pragmatic outlook to transform an integral vision into embodied institutions. This is evident in the very first part where he anchors his views on human unity to the great modern unifiers, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Here it is not an amorphous concept but a concrete, realizable and realized unity. That such unity can only be spiritual was shown by Sri Ramakrishna. The swami rightly cites the celebrated historian Arnold Toynbee, who says unambiguously: 'At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation for mankind is an Indian way. ... Sri Ramakrishna's testimony to the harmony of religions' has 'the attitude and the spirit that can make it possible for the human race to grow together into a single family—and, in the Atomic Age, this is the only alternative to destroying ourselves.'

This is the strength of the swami's book. It is careful at every step to ensure that the most notoriously nebulous of all utopias—education—does not remain just a blueprint, impressive but impractical. From this perspective, parts four, five and six are crucial. In the study of culture, the swami's suggestions are threefold: the national, international and unified-world viewpoints. That he draws a distinction between international study and a unified world view is itself a crucial point. This will, he says, 'present the integrated history of mankind's cultural and scientific development from the universal standpoint viewing the cultures as different facets of world culture and civilization'. The scientific and

the rational are of crucial significance in the wake of the renewed interest in (India's) heterodox logical traditions exemplified in the views of Professor Amartya Sen (cf. *The Argumentative Indian*), who suggests 'a communion of ideas'.

Similarly, Nityaswarupanandaji's section on the *mechanism* for the World Centre is fascinatingly functional. He suggests 'a planetary partnership involving a "communion of intellectuals" who foster "a global environment" through scholarly and scientific dialogue and learning'. Above all, he suggests that the World Civilization Centre 'will be purely non-political'. This is, of course, a debatable proposition, since any institution, by claiming to be non-political, may by that very step become politicized!

There are already the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture and the recently established University (RKMVERI) which have made some of these ideas acquire tangible forms. But a lot remains to be done: on the level of both ideology and implementation. On the level of ideology, is it desirable to claim that 'the Indian ideal is the only way of salvation for mankind'? The swami, of course, quotes Toynbee, but things have changed radically and privileging any one tradition makes for potential conflict. For instance, many are convinced that there can be an American Vedanta which has its own logic of being.

There are risks in claims which are taken as normal (if not natural) in discussing Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta. This book is, by and large, free from them. In short, this is a fascinating exploration which is of great interest in the current context of our globalized world (and its discontents).

Dr M Sivaramkrishna

Former Head, Department of English
Osmania University, Hyderabad

Practical Vedanta from Sri Krishna to Ma Anandamayee. *Acharya Bireswar Gango-padhyaya.* Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Kulpati Munshi Marg, Mumbai 400 007. E-mail: brbhavan@bom7.usnl.net.in. 2003. xvi + 185 pp. Rs 180.

Well, Vedanta is practical. If it had not been so, it would not have survived a couple of millennia and more. Ever since Western education made philosophy an academic subject, our problem has been seeing philosophy and actuality as two different things. But Vedanta has always been practised as

a life-enriching science. Acharya Bireswar Gango-padhyaya has done well in listing our Vedantins from Krishna to Ma Anandamayee. His scholarship in our traditional lore is deep and wide, and has always been tuned to watching the effect of Vedanta on everyday life. And when he writes of his personal encounters with the spiritual luminary, Ma Anandamayee, he makes it clear that universal love alone can ensure human unity on earth.

A string of quotes from our ancient texts, a chapter-wise summary of the Gita and references to modern personalities like Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo could be expected in a title like the present one. But the Acharya knows how to surprise us by stoking our curiosity, leading us to new modes of thinking, as when he speaks of a 'prosumer economy' (where the producer is full or part consumer) and the clash of civilizations in a world grown small. Come to think of it, I would rather light another candle of hope along with the Acharya than swing with the pendulum of the doomsday clock: 'Demassified electronic cottages will supplement the exploitative gigantic factory system and the building up of prosumer economies will make the economic system more rational and less exploitative. The Gandhian welfare economics of cottage industries was anachronistic in the second wave of civilization, but will be the appropriate technology for the third-wave civilization, except for the infrastructure and defence industries. This will restore the dignity of labour and "the small will really be beautiful"' (31).

There is a comparative study of Vedanta and Tantra and the manner in which Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi applied Vedantic concepts to everyday living. But the most striking essays in the book deal with the Acharya's experiences as a disciple of Ma Anandamayee for three decades. He finds in her a fusion of Vedanta and Tantra, the Gita and the *Devi Mahatmya*. According to Ma Anandamayee the destruction of Mahishasura did take place in ancient times. But it is also a continuing phenomenon, she says, for Durga is constantly engaged in slaying the asuras and will do so in the future as well by manifesting Herself again and again. This is how She will guard Her children without fail. This guardianship also includes leading the children on the path to the life divine. As the Acharya rightly concludes: 'The function of God's incarnations is not merely to destroy evil forces, but also to give new impetus to the *Dharma Chakra* (wheel of righteousness) and this latter aspect is amply demonstrated in

the lives and teachings of Śrī Rāmakrishna in the nineteenth century and Mā Ānandamayee in the twentieth century' (172).

Dr Prema Nandakumar
Researcher and Literary Critic
Srirangam

Glimpses of the Great. *S Ramakrishnan; collated by Shesharao Chavan.* Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. 2004. xxxvi + 592 pp. Rs 650.

This book is a collection of articles written by Sri S Ramakrishnan (1922-2003) over a period of forty years. Fifty-two outstanding personalities have been portrayed for us by this stalwart, who was a driving force behind Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. *Glimpses* is the right word, for great lives and their concomitant struggles cannot be contained within an article.

The personalities in this book range from religious leaders, statesmen and reformers, of both the East and the West, though more of the former. The author, during his long life, was acquainted with most of the people he writes about. This brings their personalities into sharp focus.

Ramakrishnan came under Gandhiji's influence in his boyhood and grew in stature in his aura. Thus he had first-hand experience of Gandhiji and also of those towering people of sterling qualities who had gathered round the Gandhian standard. Those were turbulent times. The turbulence and the characters shaped by it undeniably injected in young Ramakrishnan the ideal of hard work coupled with idealism and loyalty. In his long, fruitful life he came across various people who were impressed by his humility, knowledge, and strength of character. Ramakrishnan was a writer, lawyer, educationist, freedom fighter, and much more. He received the Padma Bhushan in 1991.

The volume is divided into three parts. The fifty-two articles are arranged neither in chronological order nor according to their relative social importance. The book commences with Adi Shankaracharya and ends with Father Aurelius Maschio. Swami Vivekananda says, 'Watch a man do his most common actions; those are indeed the things which will tell you the real character of a great man.' The author must have knowingly or unknowingly kept this in mind when he wrote these articles.

The writing style is simple, and the collator's devotion to the task is evident. But a big publishing

house like Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan could have done better with an improved style, design and layout, and by using standard diacritical marks. *Glimpses of the Great* is not all about great personalities who moved people, nations and cultures—we have personalities like Rajiv Gandhi and K Santhanam jostling with Lord Mountbatten and Acharya Kripalani. And Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda, towers of light for India and the world, are conspicuous by their absence.

Swami Satyamayananda
Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata

The Wonder That Was Sarada Devi. *Swami Harshananda.* Ramakrishna Math, Bull Temple Road, Bangalore 560 019. E-mail: rkmbblr_publi@vsnl.net. 2003. 64 pp. Rs 5.

A wonderful quality about Holy Mother's life is her utter simplicity. She was born in rural Bengal and the pure air and surroundings of the village blew uninterrupted through her life and words. This book by Swami Harshanandaji lays down briefly her life and message. However, 'the inspiration that has prodded it [book] is not small, but pure and noble'. This lucid exposition of the basic facts and message of Sarada Devi's glorious life makes the book a very enjoyable reading. The author is also an accomplished scholar of Sanskrit. Hence the book, after narrating her life and message, sets forth the following Sanskrit verse-compositions: *Aṣṭottaraśata-nāma-stotram*, *Aṣṭottaraśata-nāmāvaliḥ* and *Prapattiḥ*. These Sanskrit compositions underline the deep devotion of the author. One, nevertheless, feels the need for a fuller account of Sarada Devi's life and the desirability of reduction in the number of Sanskrit *stotras* which occupy a sizable part of this small book.

Swami Tyagarupananda
Principal, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira
Belur, Howrah

Book Received

Quest for the Crow. *Swami Ramanujananda.* Ramakrishna Math, PO Puranattukara, Thirussur 680 551. E-mail: srkmtsr@sancharnet.in. 2004. 61 pp. Rs 15.

Ramcharitmanas for beginners.

Reports

News from Belur Math

Srimat Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated the newly built annexe to the **Headquarters** office building on 9 December 2005 (Swami Premanandaji's birthday).

News from Branch Centres

The Swami Ranganathananda Chair for higher studies and research in Indology in today's perspective was inaugurated at **Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata**, on 17 December. Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, presided over the function, which was attended by over 1,700 people. On this occasion, Mahamahopadhyaya Dr Govinda Gopal Mukhopadhyay, chosen to be the first holder of the chair, delivered a special lecture in Bengali on Swami Ranganathanandaji's contribution to Indian thought.

Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Malda, organized Holy Mother's birthday celebrations in four correctional homes (prisons) of West Bengal.

Sri Gopalkrishna Gandhi, Governor of West Bengal, inaugurated the biennial educational exhibition of **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira** (Saradapitha, Belur) on 24 December. Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, presided over the meeting held on this occasion.

The 13th All-Tamil Nadu Bhakta Sammelan was held at **Ramakrishna Math, Nattarampalli**, from 25 to 27 December. More than 3,000 delegates, residential and non-residential, from different parts of Tamil Nadu attended the convention. The 3-day convention had three sessions daily which included talks



Invocation at the Nattarampalli bhakta sammelan

and discussions on various aspects of the Ramakrishna-Sarada Devi-Vivekananda-Vedanta movement. The programme was interspersed with bhajans and cultural presentations rendered by eminent artists, school children and devotees. A commemorative souvenir was also released. Swami Smarananandaji, monks of the Ramakrishna Order, nuns of the Sarada Math and many eminent thinkers addressed the devotees. The convention was held in a specially erected pandal, which also included a large dining area, kitchen, book-sales counter and photo exhibition. It may be recalled here that devotees in Tamil Nadu, under the guidance of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, have been conducting this annual event for the past 13 years at different places in the state.

Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore, organized a 3-day devotees' convention from 30 December 2005 to 1 January 2006. Swami Smarananandaji inaugurated the function, which was presided over by Srimat Swami Gitanandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. About 2,300 devotees and 200 volunteers took part in the convention and most of the monastic members from our Karnataka centres attended. Though the chief aim of holding the



Swami Gitanandaji lighting the lamp
at the Bangalore devotees' convention

convention was to disseminate the ideals of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda and to inform the devotees about the activities that are undertaken by the Ramakrishna Order, one of the main intentions was also to bring the private centres and Satsanga Kendras in Karnataka closer to the Order so that they could work together in harmony for greater benefit.

The diamond jubilee celebrations of **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Chennai**, and its famed Vivekananda College started on 12 January.

Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, President of India, inaugurated the Vivekananda Institute of Value Education and Culture (VIVEC) at **Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Memorial, Porbandar**, on 12 January. Addressing a large gath-

ering of about 5,000 youths participating in a convention organized by the centre, he observed that Swami Vivekananda's message is very relevant for the modern youth and that it can fill their minds with indomitable spirit. Dr Kalam also replied to a few select questions that were sent to him. (The full text of his speech and his replies to the questions are available at www.presidentofindia.nic.in.) The President then felicitated 14 selected students who had participated in the annual competition organized by the centre as part of Swami Vivekananda's birthday celebration and 16 others who had contributed in cash or kind to the centre's activities. Swami Suhitanandaji, Assistant Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, then presented Dr Kalam with the first copies of VIVEC's information brochure and a couple of other booklets published by the centre.

Mr M M Jacob, Governor of Meghalaya, unveiled a life-size statue of Swami Vivekananda at the Vivekananda Cultural Centre of **Ramakrishna Mission, Shillong**, on 12 January.

The tailoring and embroidery training centre of **Ramakrishna Ashrama, Rajkot**, at Upleta village was inaugurated on 13 January. On 15 January Sri Naval Kishor Sharma, Governor of Gujarat, visited the Ashrama and released the book *Swami Vivekananda and Emergence of India through Spiritual Culture* published by it.

Achievements

The International Children's Exhibition of Fine Arts, Lidice, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic jointly conferred the award of 'Honourable Mention' for successful creative work at the 33rd International Children's Exhibition of Fine Arts held in Lidice, Czechoslovakia, on two students of the school run by **Ramakrishna Mission, Viveknagar**.



Dr Kalam inaugurating VIVEC

10 students of the above school were awarded gold medals and 7 were awarded silver medals at the 3rd International Children's Art Competition 2005 organized by Kshitij Art Society, Gurgaon. The Society also presented the International Kshitij Ratna Award for the year to the school's arts teacher.

Yet another student of the school stood first in the national-level talent search examination organized by Vikas Educational Institutions, Vishakhapatnam. He was awarded a gold medal, a memento and Rs 15,000. In the same examination, another student of the school secured the third position at the state level and was awarded a silver medal and Rs 2,000.

A student of the school run by **Ramakrishna Mission, Narottam Nagar**, stood first in the CBSE Class X examination in the north-east region. He was invited to witness the Republic Day Parade in New Delhi from the Prime Minister's box.

A student of the school run by **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Taki**, won the second prize at the National Painting Competition 2005 organized by the Ministry of Power, Government of India.

Students of the nursing school run by **Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Lucknow**, secured the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 6th ranks in the Uttar Pradesh General Nursing and Midwifery Examination 2005.

Relief and Rehabilitation

Ramakrishna Math, Puri, distributed 395 kg rice, 49 kg dal, 123 kg *chira*, 14 l edible oil, 39 blankets, 24 dhotis and 38 saris to 16 families whose houses were burnt down by devastating fires at Indipur and Netapur villages of Puri district in January 2006.

The following centres distributed clothing items and blankets to the poor and needy in their respective localities in December 2005 and January 2006:

Agartala (400 blankets), Baranagar Mission (500 saris, 200 dhotis, 100 lungis, 400 chadars and 1,000 cakes), Belgaum (300 saris,

300 dhotis and towels), Chandipur (1,600 blankets), Chapra (610 blankets), Deoghar (1,000 blankets) Jalpaiguri (400 saris), Kanpur (252 sweaters), Medinipur (40 dhotis, 50 saris, 200 blankets), Narendrapur (500 blankets), Puri Math (213 dresses, 100 saris, 119 assorted garments and 200 blankets), Puri Mission (17 sweaters and 4,334 blankets), Raipur (200 blankets), Rajahmundry (88 saris and 124 lungis), Ramharipur (100 blankets) and Ulsoor (500 saris).

Ramakrishna Mission Seva Pratishthan, Kolkata, organized a round-the-clock medical relief camp during Makara Sankranti Mela in Sagar Island from 11 to 15 January. Altogether 5,021 patients were treated, among whom 31 received indoor medical care. Besides, 127 blankets and 103 *gerua* clothes were distributed among poor pilgrims and monks. **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Manasadwip**, arranged board and lodging facilities for 700 pilgrims in residential camps both in the mela area and at the Ashrama.

In January **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Puri**, sunk 7 tube wells in Puri and Khurda districts. The centre also distributed 16 sewing machines and 11,031 sets of school uniforms to the needy.

Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chapra, provided 4 rickshaws to poor people.

A colony of 60 new houses at Neithal Nagar in Nagapattinam district, a school-cum-shelterhouse, a community hall and a children's park at Ramakrishnapuram in Vedaranyam district, and a community hall and a children's park at Vadakku Mudasal Odai in Cuddalore district built by **Ramakrishna Math, Chennai**, were handed over to the tsunami-affected people in December 2005. With this the centre has completed the rehabilitation work it had committed itself to in the aftermath of the tsunami disaster of December 2004.

As of January the Batticaloa sub-centre of **Ramakrishna Mission, Colombo**, has handed over 16 houses to tsunami victims. *